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As strange as it may seem – and it certainly struck us as unacceptable when the weird truth dawned – some of the current **Edge** staff had never played each other at a *Street Fighter* game before we began work on this issue. (Shouldn't this sort of thing be part of the induction process?) When Capcom got in touch to offer an exclusive play session and interview with the project leader behind *Street Fighter IV*, though, the battle lines were quickly drawn, and just about every iteration of the series was dragged out of the office's groaning games cupboard, right down to a crusty old *Street Fighter II Turbo* cartridge and an engagingly yellowing, lo-fi SNES to play it on. Hours spent sitting around playing old beat 'em ups is research, after all. (Well, it's what we tell the suits from upstairs.)

No one was able to escape these *Street Fighter* sessions, not even visiting PR types dropping by to punt their own particular wares. "You don't want to play? Who doesn't want to play *Street Fighter*?" Because Capcom's series is that kind of beast – something that sits alongside the likes of *Sensible Soccer*, *Speedball 2* and *Super Mario Kart* in the Big List Of Games Everyone Played Growing Up – the kind of game to which you can return having not dabbled for years and fall comfortably back into its deeply carved nuances. A mark of a true classic is, perhaps, that playing it again way down the line is like riding a bike, irrespective of how outlandish it may have once appeared.

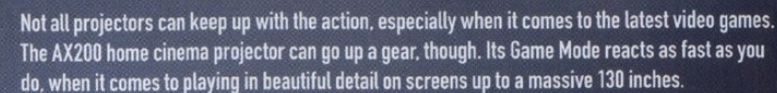
Anyway, enough of the old stuff. As is clear from this issue's cover story, while paying deep respect to what has gone before, Capcom is striving to forge something new that will be capable of creating an illustrious, long-standing heritage of its own. The story begins on page 46.

And besides, outside of some of our own particularly ill-tempered Ken/Ryu match-ups, this year in gaming has been competitive enough in itself, with Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft continuing to fight their strategically disparate battles, and many great games seeking recognition.

The **Edge** Awards (see p68) hail the victors.

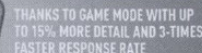


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When you have finished with this magazine please recycle it.



2D OR NOT 2D?

46

We meet with Capcom to talk, and play, *Street Fighter IV*. Will the new challenger stand up to its legendary ancestors?



REZZED UP

54

Tetsuya Mizuguchi is bringing *Rez* up to date with a widescreen, HD remix. This is the definitive version...



SEEDS OF CHANGE

64

From Capcom to Clover to PlatinumGames, *Okami* and Viewtiful Joe producer Atsushi Inaba explains his journey



THE EDGE AWARDS

68

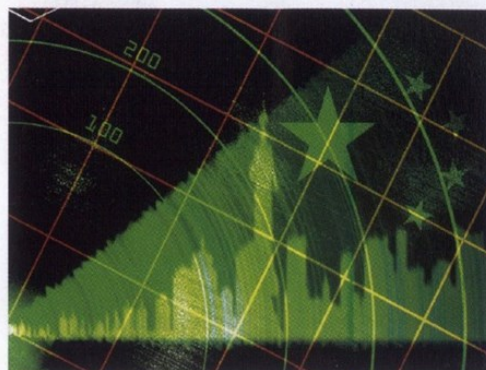
The finest hardware, software and achievements (plus some... other things) from the past 12 months in gaming



CONTENTS

JANUARY

This month



SHANGHAI RISING

58

We head to Ubisoft's Shanghai studio, and discover how China is building a bold reputation in game development

Every month

- 8 **Start**
News, interviews and more
- 24 **Industry Focus**
Videogame analysis with Screen Digest
- 26 **Something About Japan**
Brick Bardo on the trouble with pets
- 92 **Time Extend**
Stubbs The Zombie under the microscope
- 96 **The Making Of...**
Sumo Digital's Xbox iteration of *OutRun 2*
- 100 **Codeshop**
Bringing games to more mobiles than ever
- 102 **Studio Profile**
Transmission Games in figures and facts
- 103 **Edge Moves**
The very best videogame industry jobs
- 120 **Gaming In The Dark**
N'Gai Croal on his favourite game of 2007
- 122 **Hi, I'm Randy**
The complexity of interactivity, with Mr Smith
- 124 **Biffvision**
Mr Biffo succumbs to an Xbox 360 disease
- 126 **Inbox**
Your letters, and some Crashlander action

CONTENTS

CONTINUED

Hype

BURNOUT PARADISE



360, PS3

GHOSTBUSTERS



360, DS, PC, PS2, PS3, Wii

FINAL FANTASY TACTICS A2



DS



PANZER TACTICS DS



DS



DARK MESSIAH: ELEMENTS



360

GEOMETRY WARS GALAXIES



DS, Wii

FRAGILE



Wii

AGE OF CONAN



360, PC

FERRARI CHALLENGE



DS, PS3, PSP, Wii

DARK SECTOR



360, PS3

PAIN



PS3

NAMCO CARNIVAL



Wii

Review

UNREAL TOURNAMENT III



360, PC, PS3



ENDLESS OCEAN



Wii

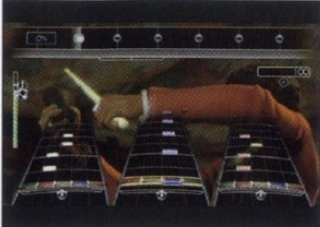
RAYMAN RAVING RABBIDS 2



Wii

START

ROCK BAND



360, PS3 80

BLACKSITE: AREA 51



360, PC, PS3 82

BATTALION WARS 2



Wii 84

FFXII: REVENANT WINGS



DS 85



THE UMBRELLA CHRONICLES



Wii 86

TIME CRISIS 4



PS3 87

GHOST SQUAD



Wii 87

AVP: REQUIEM



PSP 88



CONTRA 4



DS 89

FRONT MISSION



DS 89

MARIO & SONIC



DS, Wii 90

ORCS & ELVES



DS 91

SOCOM TACTICAL STRIKE



PSP 91



8 The digital distribution revolution
Is the disc-less dream nearly here? And what does it mean for gamers?

12 Pay to slay
Funcom explains the ins and outs of bloodthirsty MMOG, *Age Of Conan*



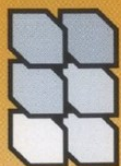
14 Prime cuts
Retro Studios on making *Metroid* and working closely with Nintendo

16 Unreal opportunities
Epic's Mark Rein talks engines, Intel, *Gears Of War*, and more



18 Into dreams
The man behind *Nights* explains how he sells Sega to America

20 Shock to the system
Sony's DualShock 3 controller finally arrives on PlayStation 3



START



RETAIL

Pipe dreams

As digital distribution starts to put the squeeze on traditional retail, we look at how games are readying themselves for the revolution

If 21st-century business has a cautionary tale, it's the story of how the music industry was brought to its knees by the internet; it failed to see its potential as a distribution medium, demonised it as a tool for pirates, and ultimately ended up surrendering a painfully huge chunk of its profits and control to Apple. Since then, media executives from every sphere have been anxious to publicly claim they won't make the same mistakes, while privately breathing sighs of relief that the much larger data sizes involved in the likes of video and games had bought them a stay of execution.

But with the inexorable increases in broadband speeds, time is running out. Clearly, the technology-driven videogame business is already exploring digital distribution avenues, but its fragmented approach, across multiple platforms and a limited range of games, has been relatively inconclusive to date. Can a new generation of distribution channels change the landscape for games? And what will the effect be on the beloved boxed copy, and the retailers who bring it to you?

Digital distribution has formed part of the gaming landscape for some years now. All three console manufacturers offer small-scale and retro game downloads. This month, Microsoft updated the

Can a new generation of distribution channels change the landscape for games? And what will the effect be on the beloved boxed copy, and the retailers who bring it to you?

file-size ante considerably by expanding its offering to first-generation Xbox games with its Xbox Originals service, while Sony has already experimented with digital distribution of a full-scale PS3 release, in the form of *Warhawk*, earlier in the year. Both companies have signalled their intent, but both are silent on concrete plans to offer major new titles for download as a matter of course.

Naturally it has fallen to gaming's open platform, the PC, to blaze a trail. Developer Valve created its own digital distribution platform, Steam, when it investigated the area a few years ago and discovered to its surprise that no one else had one in development. Although now largely well-regarded by users, publishers have been hesitant to embrace Steam, perhaps feeling that its full-purchase pricing model cut a little close to the bones of their relationships with retailers.



More widely supported have been subscription services like GameTap in the US and Metaboli in Europe. These offer unlimited access to their entire game libraries for a flat monthly fee, often with a tiered system that reserves the most recent and high-profile titles for premium subscribers. They use launch platforms that remove the need for time-consuming installation, and streaming technology that means you don't have to wait for the entire download to finish before you can play – an important factor in 'on demand' gaming, when multi-gigabyte game sizes can still challenge the fastest networks and best servers.

AWOMO's front-end takes the form of an expansive 3D world akin to that of *Second Life*. While this interface might seem unnecessarily cumbersome for those who just want to jump straight in, AWOMO also has a desktop portal for direct access to the individual games

A streaming system of this sort is at the heart of a new offering by Game Domain International, or GDI. Based on the principle that you don't need all the game data at once to play – and that a high number of common elements facilitates major data compression – GDI's system reduces the 'stub' needed to start gameplay to less than 15 per cent of the game in many cases. The game can be started somewhere between a few minutes to an hour of starting the download.

GDI will be offering downloads itself through a portal called AWOMO (A World Of My Own – see 'Pay it forward' on p11), which will be skinned with a 3D virtual social network in the style of *Second Life* or Sony's Home. But perhaps most interesting about GDI's proposition is the deals – whether through persistence, diplomacy or simple good timing – that it is signing with traditional retailers. The company will supply PC game downloads to UK heavyweight Game's website next year, as well



Market fresh

Will big releases go pay-to-play?

By and large, digital distribution services, especially subscription-based ones, do not offer the very latest releases, as publishers are wary of cannibalising their retail sales. But t5's Clemie argues that, with timely releases on a pay-to-play system, they could actually stand to gain sales at traditional retail: "I'm quite happy for people to [use our service as a demo channel]. What I'm saying to publishers is, I know the normal model is to wait until it's back catalogue, the game is six months old. But why don't you learn a little from the movie market, make it available on our system at the same time as it becomes available at retail, but only on a pay-per-play basis?"



TV networks which intend to bring games to their audience are unlikely to try to appeal to the self-described gamer – they will instead be aiming for a much more casual demographic, as Sky has so successfully with a range of properties for the kids' market



as Virgin Games, and has signed major distributor Koch Media to negotiate further deals with retailers across Europe.

"We're not trying to overturn the apple cart or break the whole industry's business model," says communications director **Tim Ponting**. "You find that major retailers, if not involved themselves, are going to put pressure on publishers not to get involved either. Digital delivery is viewed as the demise of retail, but we're bringing everybody with us, and nobody stands to lose."

A more radical on-demand system has been developed over the last six years, but only recently announced, by a company called t5 Labs. T5's Virtual Games Console will be a service supplied to, and sold on to customers by, cable TV and IP TV companies. It's unique in that it requires no game hardware in the home, just a set-top box. Off-the-shelf PC games are installed and run on servers by the network companies; t5's technology allows the

"The key thing to understand about the set-top, mobile, and latterly web markets is that they are largely composed of non-traditional players"

game to be played remotely, feeding input from the set-top box to the servers, and returning a compressed video stream of the game's visuals to the box – with, claims CEO **Graham Clemie**, minimal lag.

"In a current online gaming scenario, it's public internet, you've only got one of these servers per country if not per larger region, and that server's not being run by a telecoms company," he says.



"In our scenario, the person operating the service is a professional telecoms company. They're not going to have just one location in the country, they're going to have many. Our information is not going across several networks as it would with the public internet. This is effectively a private network. So in simplistic terms, if anything, the network latency would be less than in a normal online gaming scenario."

Clemie imagines most operators would opt for a dual offering of subscription and simple, low-priced pay-to-play services. He notes that most modern set-tops have USB ports and so could support traditional game controllers, and says it has been shown working with demos of *Need For Speed Underground 2* and *Unreal Tournament 2003* as well as *Bejewelled 2*. Control standardisation and devices are certainly issues, but the barrier to entry is extraordinarily low – no expensive hardware required at all, and instant delivery of content. Clemie also notes how appealing this remote-delivery model could be to publishers.

"From a publisher's point of view, it's another digital distribution medium – no costs for distribution, no stock and so forth. And also,





AWOMO

A WORLD OF MY OWN



START

Pay it forward

Bringing games to a world of your own

Crucial to the success of any digital distribution platform is getting the payment scheme right. AWOMO and its retail partners will both offer games as straight purchases, while AWOMO will also offer a subscription service for slightly older games. But in place of '£1 a go' pay-to-play, AWOMO will offer a 'rent to own' purchase model, which splits the full price of one game into five, paid over five hours of play. "The problem with a pay-to-play system is coming up with a solution that's equitable for both publishers and gamers," notes Ponting. But for Sky's casual market, Kelly says that the latter system is ideal: "Unlike pretty much all of retail, and a large portion of digital distribution, Sky Games' IPs can continue earning revenue and pleasing players for a long time, in some cases multiple years. They get an experience that they value at a cost that they do not find either onerous or off-putting. In the longer term they may end up spending as much on some of our games as they would have for a retail game, but they have done so under their own control."

in our case, there's absolutely zero piracy, there's no DRM to crack at all because all the source code stays on our servers. There's no second-hand market, because there's no physical goods going anywhere. It's pure profit to the bottom line."

One network the Virtual Game Console won't be appearing on is Sky's, due to the lengthy time delay of satellite delivery. But Sky, as with many TV operators, has been in the business of digital game distribution longer than almost anyone, offering very simple, 2D puzzle and platform games that run on the box itself. And Sky Games' senior game development manager **Tadhg Kelly** questions whether the market exists for full-scale 'gamers' games' to be distributed through their devices in the first place.

"The key thing to understand about the set-top, mobile, and latterly web markets is that they are largely composed of non-traditional players," he argues. "The largest distinction is probably that casual players don't really think of games as a culture or medium. To them, games are simply a habit. So the question about expansion into the hardcore space is not really about technology, it's about appropriateness. Would we be able to offer something hardcore gamers would try, and if so would we be doing so at the expense of the casual players who find hardcore gaming off-putting?"

Kelly does see retail being threatened by new forms of distribution – but imagines the markets for the two delivery methods will diverge, rather than converge. "The retail PC market is not what it used to be, but one of the fastest growing sectors is the web casual side of the business. Meanwhile, the retail response has been to devote a significant part of their business to second-hand sales to cover the shortfall. I think that the sector of the market best served by digital distribution is the small-to-medium game that simply wouldn't find purchase in the blockbuster world of retail. With so many formats fighting for shelf space, games retail has had to focus on heavy-hitters to a greater degree than ever, and that pushes the *Peggles* of this world off the radar. Their natural home is now the online world, where production costs are quite low, and the will of the audience is much more apparent."

For its part, the retail world has learned the hard way not to be dismissive of digital distribution,

as Game's deal with GDI shows. HMV's games chief, **Tim Ellis**, expresses 'support in principle' for the delivery medium, but denies concrete plans in that area. He says that HMV is exploring new ways for stores to attract customers and new gaming revenues streams. An Edinburgh store is trialling an arcade-style Gaming Zone, while the London Trocadero HMV is planning a Gamerbase pay-to-play PC gaming centre. "We're trying to broaden the way that we engage with gamers," he says. "If that means gamers coming into the store to play games and making money that way, so be it."

But widespread digital distribution for major new game releases is, reckons Ellis, still some way off: "Next year could be a good year for film, and we're looking to get involved in that somehow, but games are further behind the curve. We're waiting to see how the publishers in particular can develop their offering, and the console manufacturers will take a little longer to launch their own plan." And he also offers a timely reminder that games, like all entertainment media, are a luxury – and luxuries are best delivered wrapped and under a tree.

"We should not forget that gifting is a huge part of the market – 40 per cent of our business is done at Christmas time. People want to derive a degree of fulfilment when they spend their money. Downloads are very functional and versatile, but ultimately they're not quite as rewarding as owning the original product. I suspect that, going forward, people will want to mix and match between the two."



HMV isn't the only retailer embracing these new 'gaming zone' initiatives; Oxford Street's Zavvi (formerly Virgin Megastore) has also created a dedicated space, crammed with Wiis and 360s



Barbarian invasion

MMOG veteran Funcom talks to us about the genre's state of play

Funcom's upcoming MMOG, *Age Of Conan* (not to be confused with the recent singleplayer Conan game, reviewed in E182), delivers a distinctly adult fiction alongside its brutal, bloody combat – innovating in the MMO space as it marries combo-based attacks with *Diablo*-esque slashing. We battled the wintry climes of Norway to get hands-on time with the title (see p34), and sit down with the game's director, **Gaute Godager** (above), to discuss where Funcom intends to take the MMOG.

This combat system is more action-oriented than many other MMOGs – do you think this reflects a change in RPGs in general?

It's an interesting question. Many people have likened MMOGs to an Excel sheet, particularly in terms of combat. I think that's all well and good – I made a game like that myself. But I think inspiration from other more action RPGs like *Knights Of The Old Republic* have made me think about what else we can do on the internet that really drives activity and gives a sense of being there. I don't know if that's a general move for

RPGs but it's a change akin to moving from strategy games to realtime strategy games. It's a natural evolution of people's interests; they want to have a different type of experience whilst keeping the old experience at the same time.

Do you think this represents a move away from the use of pen-and-paper (PnP) mechanics in virtual worlds?

For me it's almost like a movement towards it. Having a choice in what the player's doing – I think that's the big difference between an MMOG and PnP. The social aspect is very, very similar in many ways, but MMOGs' rules are very fixed and what you do doesn't matter as much as what your character does. Adding the element of player action on top is what we're doing. In some ways I think we're going back towards the PnP freedom, the creativity, exposing the player skill in some way.

Does *Age Of Conan* have opportunities for communities to create their own stories with each other in that freeform PnP sense?

We have a host of animations to unlock player



By setting the game in a pre-existing fiction, Funcom has a lot of material from which to draw. Significantly, the large numbers of people signing up to the beta suggest that its attraction isn't just limited to fans of the original stories

creativity. If you go to YouTube and search for WOW you'll find videos of weddings, porno movies, and they do everything with the few tools they have. There is really, really so little that you need to give the players – but we are trying to give them a lot. You can build your own cities in *Age Of Conan*, which encapsulates the whole of this. I'm a psychologist, that's my education, so the social aspect is paramount in anything you do. You play MMOGs for one reason, and that is to be seen by other players in various ways. To be recognised, to compete. It's this really dualistic thing – someone sees me, I see them. Everything we do needs to reflect this, all game mechanics, all items. Take a simple thing like armour. If I were to put cool-looking armour as the best loot from the first quest in the game, it would dilute the meaning for all the rest you get. Why does it do that? Because players think that until someone sees them with something finer they've not really achieved much in the sense of how they look. The look of the armour, how people see you and what you achieve are connected, so when you kill the last big dragon or

"If you've been dining on McDonalds for four years you might want a bloody juicy steak with red wine, and I think that's what we're trying to give the player right here"

daemon that's when you get the best-looking armour in the whole game, because people will want to know where you got it. That in essence is an MMOG – that recognition thing; how you are seen by your peers.

In terms of what *Age Of Conan* does in comparison to other MMOGs, how do you feel about the MMOG market? Do you think people are playing more than one?

Demographics show that they are playing more than one, but they have one main. If you look at a year of real-time, they will have invested in 17, 18 months of game-time – which means that a couple of games overlap most of the time, and that their main game can switch, particularly around expansions. It's also interesting to see people who move completely to another game, who may go back to the first game a year later. I think people are getting more and more used to the idea of subscribing to an online game

and think that's OK, and don't think of that \$15 a month as a big outlay. They see they get good value, basically.

Given that *Age Of Conan* has a lot of adult content, how can the game poach players from other MMOGs?

We are definitely trying to appeal to a mature demographic, but our statistics show that the average age of a player in an MMOG is 25. That's not only in *Anarchy Online*, but when we talk to our competitors it appears to be that way across the board. People say: "Don't go too mature – that's risky; you'll lose all the 14 year olds." But there's not that many! They just make a lot of noise. I hope we can appeal to people who want something more than the pink-dressed elves. If you've been dining on McDonalds for four years you might want a bloody juicy steak with red wine, and I think that's what we're trying to give the player right there.



Newswire



Peripheral vision

While Sony's PSP has had multimedia aspirations from the outset, Nintendo's DS has been slower to demonstrate its potential. Japanese thirdparty developer am3, however, aims to repurpose the platform as a video and music player with DSvision – and is fully licensed by Nintendo to do so. Content can be purchased from an online portal and loaded onto a flash card via USB.

Am3 isn't alone in hijacking the DS, although some ventures are less forward-looking: Cyber Gadget has released an NES cartridge reader (above) for the handheld. While Nintendo's complacency has so far been the gain of thirdparty companies, will an official storage card and a downloadable retro catalogue end this?

Kelbaugh (near right) and Pacini take turns with something that's surely a little short to be a bounty hunter



INTERVIEW

"The R4 looks like a simple piece of plastic. It is just a couple of centimetres square, a few millimetres thick and unbelievably easy to use. For Nintendo it is the Christmas stocking filler from hell."

The Times Online describes the menace posed to the DS by piracy-enabling thirdparty storage devices

"We are keeping a close eye on the products and studying them. But we cannot smash all of them."

With an official storage card on the horizon, Nintendo decides to bide its time in the battle against the R4

"I would choose *Rock Band* over American Idol or over any of the other flimsy truths masquerading as music. With *Rock Band*, you can play along to Black Sabbath or Nirvana and possibly find new ways of appreciating their artistry by being allowed to perform parallel to it. *Rock Band* puts you inside the guts of a song."

Sleater-Kinney singer and guitarist Carrie Brownstein waxes lyrical over *Rock Band*'s ability to inspire young musicians

"And the first thing [Shigeru Miyamoto] said was: 'Why would you put guns on cars? Don't cars crash into each other? Isn't that what they do?'"

Retro Studios' game director Mark Pacini recalls feeling a little deflated by Shigeru Miyamoto's derisive opinion of *Twisted Metal*

"OK, we get the message. All you want on that channel is remakes of old, shite arcade games and crap you vaguely remember playing on your Amiga."

An exasperated Jeff Minter vents his spleen following lacklustre sales of *Space Giraffe* on Xbox Live Arcade

Retro active

Taking a break from *Metroid*, Retro Studios talks about the experience of working on one of Nintendo's prestige franchises

Since being handed the licence to make *Metroid* games in 2000, the Texas-based Retro Studios has quietly worked on the franchise and only rarely granted interviews. However, after the release of *Metroid Prime 3: Corruption*, Retro's final *Metroid* game (for the foreseeable future), we took the chance to speak with company president Michael Kelbaugh and game director Mark Pacini.

Exactly how does Retro Studios interact with Nintendo?

Michael Kelbaugh: There's a tremendous amount of dialogue between us. Via email, telephone, video conferences and visits to and from them, we have a lot of face time.

On the *Metroid Prime* titles, we were one team – part of which just happened to be in Japan. We work with Kensuke Tanabe, of Nintendo's Software

Planning Division. He helps us to ensure we're making Nintendo-quality games and had a tremendous amount of creative influence on the *Metroid Prime* titles. We also worked with Yoshio Sakamoto. *Metroid* is his 'baby' and he made sure that we realised his vision.

Mark Pacini: Sakamoto didn't have a lot of day-to-day interaction with us, but he was the sounding board if we wanted to add anything that would affect Samus as a character.

MK: If we came up with a new feature, he might say: "She would never do that."

MP: We work extremely closely with Tanabe, however. I think that's why we've received comments from Japanese developers that our games feel like Japanese games in terms of attention to detail. Tanabe helped!

MK: The *Metroid Prime* series would not have been the same without him.





So Nintendo is involved in every design decision Retro Studios makes?

MP: It's more granular later in the project. If we show them something and they say, "Meh, it's OK," we know that's way too early for them to want to look at it. As we get later in a project they get more detailed, because polish is what makes a Nintendo game. They hammer the game from every possible angle. It can be literally as small as moving a box one centimetre to the left. They can spot these little details that are so important to game flow.

Talking about flow, many people found the difficulty spikes of *Metroid Prime* and its sequel off-putting.

MP: When we started the first *Metroid Prime* we analysed what makes a 'Metroid game'. We had to capture that essence.

One of the aspects that we thought about was the difficulty and how you're never worried about dying until you get to a boss battle. And that's key, because the player shouldn't be afraid to explore. The challenge of the game was finding your way around, but the 'physical dexterity' part was the boss battles. We tried to make the boss battles puzzle-like, so if you knew how to fight the boss it might be easy, but if you didn't it'd be real hard.

The mistake we made in *Metroid Prime 2* was that we made the whole game far too difficult. For *Corruption* we re-evaluated and moved back to the true *Metroid* philosophy.

How did you find designing a game for the Wii Remote and Nunchuck?

MP: The main concern we had was that we had too many functions for the amount of buttons. Even though we ended up using every button on

"Polish is what makes a Nintendo game. They hammer the game from every possible angle. It can be as small as moving a box one centimetre to the left. They can spot these little details"

the controller, we didn't have to drastically simplify the game. We used techniques like a stacking system for beams. We originally discussed not having any elemental upgrades, but Tanabe felt that limited choice, so we left that in. What really helped was freeing things from buttons, like using Nunchuk flicks to grapple.

There was some debate about whether firing missiles on the D-pad felt right, but to be honest we were out of options. Visor selection was a big deal as well. At one point the D-pad was to be used to select the visors, but we placed a visor select option on the Minus button. We were able to simplify, but *Metroid Prime 3* isn't a casual game, and there is a learning curve to the controls.

Do you feel that the Wii Remote is beneficial to the game in the end?

MP: There's no question. I think it's the most fun game that we've made.



Kelbaugh on what brought Nintendo to Retro: "I think Nintendo were looking for somewhere to experiment with a new style of *Metroid* while keeping true to the franchise"



Slim fast

SCEI has announced that a million units of the new slimmer PSP were shipped in Japan during the two months following its September launch, breaking the record of the previous version of the PSP by a two-week margin. And that doesn't even include the 77,777 units sold in Japan with the release of *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII* in the week before the Slim's official launch. Such impressive figures further bolster the platform's position as the fastest-selling PlayStation format.



INTERVIEW

Power struggle

As Unreal Tournament III gets underway, Epic's Mark Rein talks life atop the ladder

In a secluded corner of Birmingham's monstrous Omega Sektor LAN café, **Mark Rein** struggles to recall the Unreal Engine games featured in last month's **Edge**. There were two on opposite pages in Hype. One was reviewed. *Turok*? He sighs – there are simply too many. If this is braggadocio, it's also fact. For every Unreal Engine 3 game you can mention, there'll be one you're unaware of, and a good few more in development. For Epic's VP, here to kick off the third generation of *Unreal Tournament*, remembering them all is just one of the challenges.

There have been some high-profile developers struggling with Unreal Engine 3. Namco with *Frame City Killer*, for example, and Silicon Knights with *Too Human*. What went wrong? We can't make everybody's games, obviously. And that stuff happens, right? The number of games that get delayed which don't use Unreal is

a lot higher than the number of games which do. If X number of games get started with any given technology, then X number are not going to work out.

We're pretty up-front with people. If you're going to try and ship a game before us, at the same time or just after us, you're going to be inventing some of the things we're inventing. These games typically break off months earlier, and only integrate the engine changes we make when absolutely necessary. So there's always a risk when it comes to optimisation, and simply being on your own. Right now, though, we're in great shape.

Would you say you're keeping up with the demands of supporting so many licensees? Absolutely. Today I visited the Swordfish guys in Birmingham, and they blew me away. Their game was incredible. I mean, it was a step up over what we've shipped so far. And I asked them that

"You just have to look at games like *BioShock* and *Stranglehold* to see that we're doing a good job on support. Licensees are shipping games – that's the best measure"

question, and they said they're happy with the engine and they've learned it. You just have to look at games like *BioShock*, *Mass Effect* and *Stranglehold* to see that, yeah, we're doing a good job on support. Licensees are shipping games – that's gotta be the best measure.

How's your ongoing battle with Intel over its integrated chipsets?

[Laughs] They claim they're gonna fix this problem next year, so I'm cautiously optimistic that they'll

solve it. We had a meeting, actually, with their head of integrated graphics – and in the end we shook hands. In fact, I was so excited by what he said was coming down the pipe that

I might have hugged him. Of course, it's never fast enough for us, and there are millions of those crappy Intel integrated graphics cards out there now. But you know what? At least now they realise how important this is to them, because as they head towards these 20- and 40-core CPUs, they know they'll have to raise visual computing in a much bigger way.

***Gears Of War* on PC has caused ructions among 360 fans with its exclusive content. What's the deal? Is it going to appear? Or is it too demanding?**

Can't we all just get along? [Laughs] The PC version is built on a newer version of the engine, and to go back and do loads of patches to a game that's out there and is stable – we risk breaking a lot of content. So we made a conscious decision. And we've given the 360 guys some pretty neat stuff for free – certainly more than most other games do. More than any game I'm aware of. If you went back to bring the 360 version up to the engine build the PC version's running, it would mean sacrificing the work we're doing now to bring *UTIII* to 360.



Epic claims the PS3 version of *UTIII* will see mouse and keyboard support, as well as the means to play user mods ported over from PC – but doing all this on Xbox 360 is a trickier proposition



Mark Rein has recently thrown his weight behind console development, stating the stability of such platforms as their major benefit over the PC, with its ever escalating high-end



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Some games never see the light of day. There can be any number of reasons: nefarious conspiracies bring some down, others are scuppered by unforeseen financial woe, while the majority hit the chopping block because they are simply not commercially viable. The Lost Levels team is dedicated to unearthing these little-known or never-seen titles, producing articles that are less 'The Making Of...' and more 'The Undoing Of...' It's a cornucopia of failure – and although many probably never deserved to make it to market, there are a fair few whose sinking is something to regret. A highlight is *Colors*, a fairly accomplished GTA-a-like which ventured into new territory by featuring gaming's first jail sodomy. Despite its promise, *Colors* made the fatal mistake of pitching itself to the ill-fated Gizmondo handheld and was so consigned to oblivion. We can only hope that Rockstar is taking notes for *GTAIV*.

Site:
The Lost Levels
URL:
www.lostlevels.org

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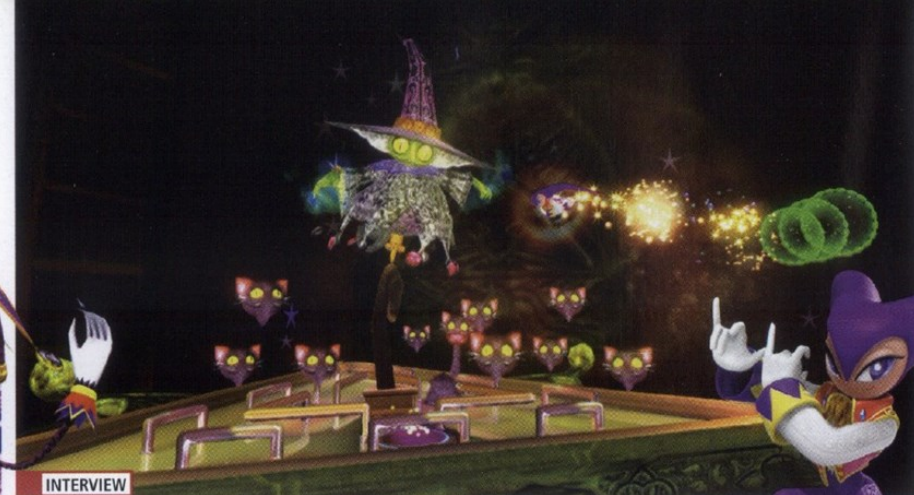
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INTERVIEW

Nights watchman

The man who sold Sonic is about to try and do the same for the last preserve of the diehard Sega fan: Nights



lizuka's past work is a mixed bag, but *Nights: Journey Of Dreams* shows promise. The anticipation has been masterfully teased along by Sega, but it won't be long now until we find out if the concept can still fly – or not



Takashi Iizuka is a Sonic Team stalwart. He worked as a designer on *Nights Into Dreams* and the first *Sonic Adventure*, before heading to San Francisco in 1999 to head up Sonic Team USA, later renamed Sega Studio USA. There he has acted as director and lead designer of the controversial (but successful) *Sonic Adventure 2*, *Sonic Heroes* and *Shadow The Hedgehog*. We caught up with him to find out if his next release – *Nights: Journey Of Dreams*, a sequel 11 years in the making and due in January on the Wii – can combine his undeniable massmarket nous with critical and fan acclaim.

What was Sega's thinking behind setting up a Sonic Team studio in the US?

I wanted to move there! I thought Sonic was very suitable for the US market, so I wanted to develop the character and the games in the US. I think it's easier to understand the market if you live there.

What have you changed about *Nights* to make it appeal to western audiences?

For example, the child characters have more suitable names. And also the voice-acting – we recorded the character voices in British English. I tried to make the gameplay as simple as possible, so you could play for a long time; easy to pick up and play, but difficult to master. That's the global standard.

Had you ever experimented with motion-sensing control before the Wii came along?

Yes, more than a decade ago. After we launched the original *Nights* on Saturn, we produced a prototype motion-sensing controller, and tried to develop a *Nights* sequel for it. But in the end it didn't happen.

You've got several different control methods in the game – why did you opt to do that?

Because I have to see that warning screen that tells you you have to connect or disconnect the Nunchuk, or connect some other controller before the game can start. I wanted to create it so you can

pick up and play it whenever you want; you can just put the disc in. For example, I love *Wii Sports*' tennis and baseball and bowling, but I never play boxing because it requires the Nunchuk.

You've made games at the US studio that have sold very well, but haven't been well received by critics or hardcore fans. Why do you think that is?

I felt that if I kept developing *Sonic Adventure* sequels, only core gamers would pick them up. I wanted to develop Sonic for more general users as well, so that's why I changed the name each time. With *Nights: Journey of Dreams*, we didn't call it *Nights 2* because I wanted to create it for a mass market, not necessarily for fanatics who've waited 11 years. To make it appeal to that market, I needed to introduce the story from the beginning. There's still the original gameplay the hardcore loves, but we've combined it with things that kids love – like rollercoasters, or simple action-platforming with the children.



The huggy colours of *Nights'* community features are hardly a surprise, and the emphasis on communicating through emoticons looks to be the new standard on Nintendo's family-friendly watch

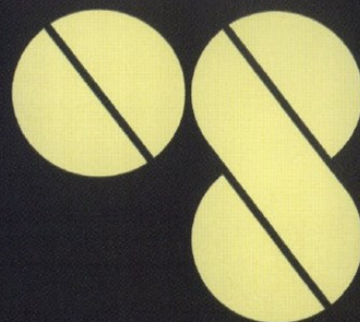
OUT THERE



NO MORE HEROES GETS DOWN AND DIRTY

This must surely be a videogaming first – the upcoming *No More Heroes* from Suda 51 has its own official toilet paper. Given out free at a promotional event by Suda-51 and Yasuhiro Wada (of Marvellous Entertainment, the game's publisher), according to an eyewitness only 20 of the precious rolls were distributed. Surely that makes it one of the more valuable items of gaming merchandise in recent years – and the picture of Travis on the throne is adorable. At least it demonstrates that Suda and team have their eye on the practical aspects of the game – and, yes, any jokes about this and *Killer 7* are beneath us all.





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Shock tactics

The PS3 controller puts its shaky start behind it with the addition of rumble

At long last, Sony brings rumble back to its controllers – the end of the feature's hiatus following the settlement of a patent-infringement lawsuit brought against the company by force-feedback giant Immersion.

Released in Japan in November, the DualShock 3 sees little change on the unusual ergonomics of the Sixaxis, with its oddly angled convex triggers and idiosyncratic shape, but the new controller at least reintroduces a decent heft, weighing a fraction more than a wired 360 pad.

The first few PS3 games offering rumble compatibility out of the box have already hit the market – *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* and *Ratchet &*



Inevitably, the DS3 sacrifices battery life when rumble is engaged, lasting approximately half as long between charges as a standard Sixaxis joystick.

Clank: Tools Of Destruction both use it to good, although unremarkable, effect. Several already-released games, such as *MotorStorm*, *Resistance: Fall Of Man* and *Heavenly Sword*, have been patched to incorporate the feature and, following the version-2.0 PlayStation 3 firmware update, fans of older games will be pleased to discover that PS2 games are also supported.

While there has been a lukewarm reaction to the manner in which the 'last generation' feature

has been retrospectively applied to games released earlier in the PS3's life, the list of titles tailor-made to use the feature should be much longer by the time the controller hits American and European markets this coming spring.

Continue

Neighbours
They just don't get this Rock Band thing, mmm?

Quarter-circle magic
How quickly the old moves flood back to the thumbs

Doh... Ray... Egon!
Come on, Aykroyd, show us that you've still got it

Quit

Wii shortages
Because seeing innocents ripped off makes us blub

Region-locked consoles
Wasn't globalisation meant to sort this out?

Limp political allegory
'US policy = monsters!' really doesn't cut it



Author: Chris Wooding
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 978 0 575 07699 0



THE FADE

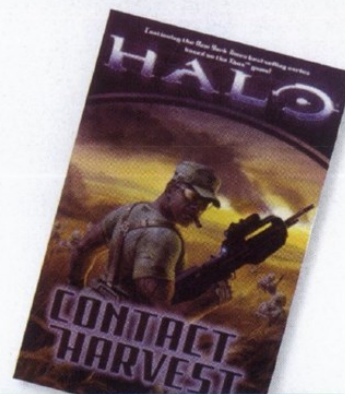
Underground fantasy is steeped in political conspiracies and corporate assassination in this tale

Chris Wooding seems to be out to prove he can write in any style and for any audience he wants. So after a series of children's books, he did grown-up fantasy for his Braided Path trilogy. With *The Fade* he's shifted laterally, into the sort of baroque fantasy that's similar in taste and tone to Joe Abercrombie's *First Law* and Scott Lynch's *Gentleman Bastards* books. *The Fade* is a more straightforward telling, however, as bonded assassin Orna sneaks her way around the underground cities of the Eskaran, ensuring her master's political and business rivals are silently dealt with. Yet, all around, the ongoing war between the Gurta and the Eskaran rages, and with her son volunteering for the frontline, Orna begins to feel uneasy. Still, it doesn't take too long before she's in a much worse position: widowed and captured behind enemy lines.

From there, the pace starts to grov as escape, revenge and familial reconciliation are attempted. But perhaps what works best in *The Fade* is the crackling backdrop upon which the narrative is placed. There are the tortuous skeins of oligopolists double-crossing each other, not to mention the secretive pirate gangs, insurrectionists and exotic species that inhabit the surface regions of the planet. So even while Orna's ultimately tragic tale proves satisfying enough, what's more interesting will be to see if Wooding can contain his wandering talents for long enough to build something more solid on the foundations he's created.



Author: Joseph Staten
Publisher: Tor
ISBN: 978 0 7653 1569 4



HALO: CONTACT HARVEST

There's no Master Chief, but Bungie writer Staten's debut has plenty of Halo backstory, as well as some robot love

You might think the fifth novelisation based within the *Halo* universe – a story that doesn't even mention Master Chief – would be thin stuff. It's not going to be nominated for the Booker Prize, sure, but as the first book from longtime Bungie writer Joe Staten, *Halo: Contact Harvest* does possess a certain presence. And if nothing else, at least you know there's not going to be any continuity howlers. Set during the first contact between the United Nations Space Command and the Covenant, the action takes place on the peaceful agricultural planet of Harvest. There's a nasty low-level insurrection occurring elsewhere within the UNSC, so Marine staff sergeant (and walk-on *Halo* character) Avery Johnson is more than a little surprised when he's transferred to such a backwater. Of course, there's trouble brewing.

The reason is the arrival of the first elements of the Covenant, who are attempting to track down Forerunner relics, and it's the finer anthropological details of the theocratic aliens that seem to get Staten's juices really flowing. So while Johnson is mobilising the troops and wielding his assault rifle, the real action occurs back in High Charity as the future Prophet of Truth plans his takeover. More local colour is provided by Grunt Deacon Dadab who, if anything, provides a more balanced and sympathetic character than Johnson. Still, it's the subtle romance between Harvest's Als Mack and Sif that provide the book's best-written moments.

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INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

House Of The Dead 2 & 3 Return

FORMAT: Wii PUBLISHER: SEGA



Ghost Squad paves the way for a less spectral undead, again fleshed out with co-op multiplayer. Why no *HOTD4*? Blame the lack of HD, perhaps, or shotguns. Or time, effort and impetus

Samurai Warriors: KATANA

FORMAT: Wii PUBLISHER: KOEI



The idea of slash-gesturing your way through this series' missions is absolutely terrifying, but at least there's a gun available this time. Still, you might want to start draining that elbow fluid early

Lego Batman

FORMAT: TBC PUBLISHER: WARNER BROS



More news emerges from the darkness, this time hinting at a larger game than *Lego Star Wars*, with a huge cast of bad guys escaping Arkham Asylum, all available to collect and control

Hail To The Chimp

FORMAT: 360, PS3 PUBLISHER: GAMECOCK



The feature list for Wideload's party-political party-game: 'A flawed electoral system, backstabbing, self-possessed newscasters, fund-raising with fat cats and inane political ads'

Silent Hunter 4: U-Boat Missions

FORMAT: PC PUBLISHER: UBISOFT



After those early technical hiccups, Ubisoft's sub-sim hits flank speed with its first major update. Strategic support requests are the main addition, together with the obvious German campaign

MX Vs ATV Untamed

FORMAT: 360, DS, PS2, PS3, PSP, Wii PUBLISHER: THQ



THQ's often underestimated, hard-working off-roader hits the big arena with an all-format assault. Expect huge outdoor venues, *Enduro*-style obstacle courses and a new multi-class career mode

Dragoneer's Aria

FORMAT: PSP PUBLISHER: KOEI



Nippon Ichi's new one gets additional help from Hitmaker, with character design by *Lineage II* art director Juno Jeong. Music, meanwhile, somehow comes courtesy of Johann Sebastian Bach

Blood Bowl

FORMAT: 360, DS, PC, PS3 PUBLISHER: SCEE



Consider this year's fantasy bloodsport revival complete now that the daddy's in the stadium. Cyanide will tackle Games Workshop's progenitor, outscoring *Speedball Tournament* on the format front

Sensible World Of Soccer

FORMAT: 360 PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS



Sure to be lost amid this busiest of Christmases, old and new finally clash this month. Note the lack of a certain magazine brand from the screenshots; we just supplied the moral support

INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH Headcase

www.nitrome.com/games/headcase/

London-based developer Nitrome has a fair number of excellent Flash games on its website. So far, the favourite in the *Edge* office has proven to be *Headcase*, a game which offers a neatly executed twist on traditional platforming conventions. Essentially dispensing with gravity, the pixelated protagonist can walk around any surface of a platform and launch himself straight off, bashing through obstacles and enemies with his big helmet until he lands on another level. The game controls this mechanic by making green surfaces

sticky and impossible to leap from, directing you from one non-stick pink surface to the next, avoiding perils as you go with careful timing and forward-planning.

Headcase escalates the difficulty with giant wrecking balls, projectiles and electric fields, introducing new ideas at a decent pace over the course of its 25 levels. As with Nitrome's other games, the art style is gorgeous and cohesive – if the game wasn't already terribly addictive, the way it looks would almost be a reason to continue playing in itself.

CREATE

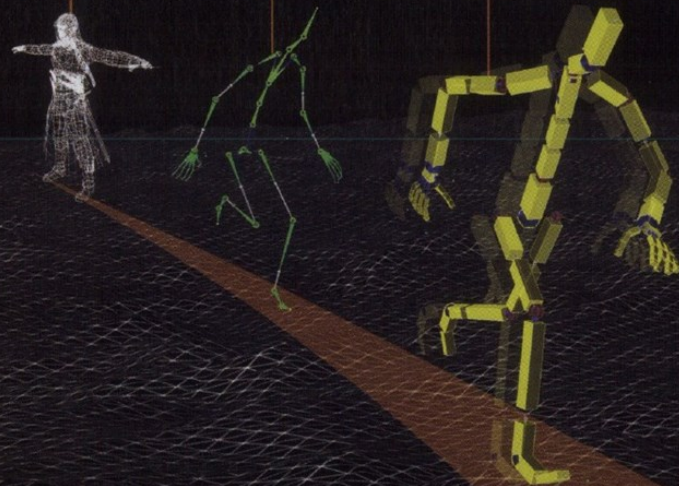
In *Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft used Autodesk® 3ds Max® software to create a hero character so real you can almost feel the coarseness of his tunic.

ANIMATE

Autodesk® MotionBuilder™ software enabled the assassin to fluidly jump from rooftops to cobblestone streets with ease.

INTEGRATE

Using Autodesk® HumanIK® middle-ware, Ubisoft grounded the assassin in his 12th century boots and his run-time environment.



**HOW UBISOFT GAVE
AN ASSASSIN HIS SOUL.**

autodesk.co.uk/Games



Image courtesy of Ubisoft

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Industry

FOCUS

In association with Screen Digest

Q4 2007 releases
split between SKUs
based on new
game IP and
existing game IP



Face-off: old versus new

If the shift to support the Wii is the headline story, what other Q4 content trends have been uncovered? It's interesting to examine the ratio of new game intellectual property (IP) coming to market compared to established game IP. Although many great games are sequels or are based on IP previously used in games, the quantity of new IP goes some way to identifying how healthy the industry is with regard to this particular form of content innovation, or indeed how favourable the business risk environment is to nurturing new game IP. There is no doubt that, with the introduction of new consoles, gamers like new IP alongside updates of old favourites. The results suggest that publishers rely heavily on established game brands and franchises in an industry that's dripping with risk. Only 37 per cent of games released in Q4 will be based on new IP. Though one might expect a lower ratio of new IP games on the platforms loaded with more investment risk, surprisingly the ratio of new IP to established IP is similar for all three platforms.

Platform jump

In the first of a new series, Piers Harding-Rolls, senior games analyst at Screen Digest, looks at how the industry has fallen in love with Wii

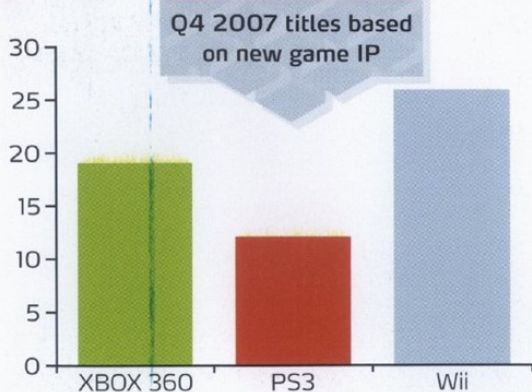
Screen Digest has been collecting data in relation to the release of console games since the launch of the Xbox 360 back at the end of 2005, but we've waited until Christmas 2007 to release our first analysis of the data trends. It is an appropriate time: all three consoles are going head to head for consumers' attention and publishers are looking to generate up to half of their annual revenue over the Christmas season, so having an understanding of the competitive climate for games is pretty much essential for these companies.

Many of the trends we have uncovered make for interesting reading. The big story is how publisher support for the Wii has increased steadily following its very successful sales run since launch. If some increase in recent support has been as a direct result of the growth in the Wii installed base – there have been some high-profile announcements this year from the likes of EA and Take-Two detailing a turnaround in platform strategy to produce more Wii games – this platform shift has also been unquestionably underpinned and encouraged by the massive success of Nintendo's other platform, the DS – shorter development times for many Wii games and

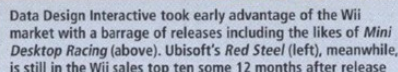
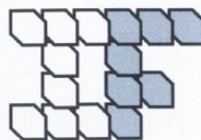


lower development costs allowing publishers to make changes fairly rapidly. As a result, of the 178 console game SKUs being released in Q4 (this includes counting multiple SKUs of the same title on different consoles), 92 are finding their way on to the Wii, compared to 48 on the 360 and 38 on the PS3. As only four of the Wii titles are published by Nintendo itself, the depth and extent of thirdparty publisher support represents a significant change from the GameCube.

Whether this strategy pays off for publishers is another matter, however.



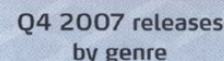
Thirdperson adventure is the most popular game genre identified by Screen Digest in 2007. *Drake's Fortune* is one of the most notable examples



This is the first time budget titles have been introduced to a console at this stage of the cycle, and shows how far the Wii has gone to turn console content convention on its head

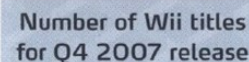
So which publishers are most active on the Wii, and does quantity result in quality for the gamer? Well, it would seem as though some lesser-known publishers are seeking to muscle in on the growing Wii opportunity, perhaps while a few of the bigger publishers are caught napping. Data Design Interactive, based in the UK, is expected to release ten Wii titles during Q4, more than many of the largest thirdparty publishers including EA,

Of the established publishers, Ubisoft has been ahead of many of its rivals with its substantial support of the Wii. Its decision to invest heavily at an early stage, perhaps convinced by the potential of the Wii following the success of the DS, puts the publisher in a strong position for Christmas with the release of 12 titles for the Wii in Q4. Notably, even though all of these titles are multiplatform releases (mostly handheld and PC-based), many are actually console-exclusive to the Wii.



Does the lack of innovation driven by increasing business risk extend to the types of game genre we get to experience this Christmas? Q4 releases show a large number of titles from the thirdperson adventure genre. Perhaps the most flexible of genres on which to deploy a wide variety of IP, there will be around 40 thirdperson adventures available for gamers in Q4. The next most popular genres are sports (24), FPS (22) and racing (20). Although this reflects that the vast majority of investment will be taking place in what are considered the incumbent (and perhaps financially safe) game genres, the large choice of genres available to gamers during Q4 is a sign of an industry ready to establish new genres and innovate. This bodes well for the overall health of the industry.

www.screendigest.com





Robby the rabbit, RIP

Grieving game producer Brick Bardo ponders virtual pets



I 'll begin with something personal: just last night, my pet rabbit died. He was eight years old, which in those nonsensical equivalents you always hear would make him 80 or 90 human years old – I suppose in that sense he died naturally of old age. Needless to say, I was very fond of Robby the rabbit, a name I chose from a

favourite old science-fiction movie of mine, and it made me realise how dogs, cats, birds, reptiles and even rabbits have a powerful influence on people's minds.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, you're thinking, why should I care about a sci-fi nut's dead pet?

Well, what Robby's death made me think of was the growing trend of 'digital pets'. People have fish which swim around their computer screen, or Tamagotchi or *Nintendogs*. They have ones which aren't software, but hardware: the likes of Aibo and Furby. In Japan,

they've proliferated over recent years with several videogame companies getting in on the act: Sega's *Puchi* and *Dream Pet* series; Konami's *Robochu*. There are so many that inevitably some of them become hits and 'must-have' consumer items – and I'm sure a few of you have bought one or two 'pet simulators'.

I've bought some of them, with mixed results.

If we faced a similar situation to Philip K Dick's *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?* would we create such artificial animals? The technology isn't quite there yet, but I have a feeling we'll see attempts within our lifetimes

Some were very true to their technological roots and were gaming oriented, while others were really focused on simulating pet behaviour. Others have purely superficial resemblances. But I always had Robby for my 'real' pet needs, and I wondered how much time people actually put into these digital pets.

Personally, the time I've spent on these things ranges from one or two hours to days and, in the

longest cases, a few months. Thinking back, that surprises me, and I even feel a tinge of longing for my favourites – but I'm pretty sure all the digital pets I used to play with are dead by now. That doesn't bother me, but I know that some people are quite affected by these things. Someone I knew was absorbed by her *Nintendog*. After a few months, she got a little bored and decided to

delete it rather than just neglect it until it ran away. Now, here's where it gets weird. In *Nintendogs*, the delete function is a dog pound, and the game displays a message along the lines of 'Are you sure you want to give this dog to the pound? You will not be able to see him ever again'. At this point, she hesitated. Rather than deleting a saved file in a game, it had become almost like putting the dog in a place where you know it will be put down. So

Sony's Aibo started life in 1999 and was discontinued in 2006, although the technology continues to be developed in other products



Tamagotchi virtual pets caused so much trouble in schools that later versions were engineered with a 'pause' button

she asked other people for advice, and it took her a few days to work up the resolve to press that button. Until then I'd always thought the fact that digital pets can be turned off was their main appeal, rather than a problem.

Philip K Dick's *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?* describes a world where living animals have disappeared and been replaced by imitations. If we faced a similar situation, would we create such artificial animals? The technology isn't quite there yet, but I have a feeling we'll see attempts at such super-realistic approximations of animals within our lifetimes.

Let's say we achieved, somehow, a perfect animal AI with an indistinguishable 'skin' over the technology: it looked like the animal, simulated the behaviour, had realistic reactions and formed attachments. Would this trigger a popular move toward such robotic animals? I believe that, initially, there would be a massive boom but, ultimately, the market would collapse.

Imagine when you are busy, going out or

travelling somewhere, just switching off your dog. There's something alien in the last bit of that sentence, isn't there? People who have real pets probably read that in horror. And this disjoint wouldn't be solved if you integrated a function where the dog would 'break' if it wasn't fed. It's not about that. If you think about what it means to have a 'pet', surely gaining trust, creating a strong link with it and taking care of it are the prerequisite conditions to refer to an animal in that way?

That's why I'm sure I'm going to get another pet in the near future, and I will probably experience this deep sadness again that I'm feeling today. But there's more than sadness: there's also a joy and a sense of healing from my friendship with Robby. As for the perfect digital pet that would never die, if it becomes a reality I'd definitely love to try it out. But I'm in search of a world different from that of Philip K Dick's vision, something closer to that of Stephen King. If there really was a Pet Sematary, I'd be walking there today to lay my rabbit to rest.



Weekly Famitsu (Enterbrain) Japanese sales: November 12-18

Software (week's sales, and total sales to date):

1. *Mario Party DS* (Nintendo, DS): 114,868 (357,063)
2. *Biohazard Umbrella Chronicles* (Capcom, Wii): 104,960
3. *Shin Sangokumusou 5* (Koei, PS3): 73,437 (249,671)
4. *Game Center CX* (BNG, DS): 46,327
5. *Pro Yakyu Famista DS* (BNG, DS): 44,664
6. *Super Mario Galaxy* (Nintendo, Wii): 43,317 (378,007)
7. *Heavenly Sword* (SCE, PS3): 15,879
8. *Wii Sports* (Nintendo, Wii): 15,278 (2,106,400)
9. *Hajimete No Wii* (Nintendo, Wii): 14,619 (1,662,342)
10. *Final Fantasy Tactics A2* (Square Enix, DS): 14,426 (249,048)

Hardware (week's sales):

1. DS: 80,827
2. PlayStation Portable: 66,478
3. PlayStation 3: 52,816
4. Wii: 36,413
5. PlayStation 2: 8,821
6. Xbox 360: 5,685
7. Game Boy Micro: 556
8. Game Boy Advance SP: 296

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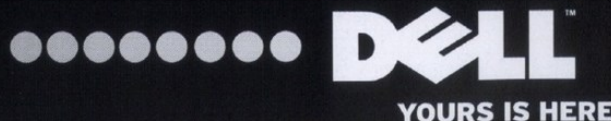
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Wii, NINTENDO

Patapon



Ever since that TGS demo, the little warriors just keep walking behind our eyes, drumming in our ears, and those brilliant chants are still rolling around our minds.

PSP, SCE

Grand Theft Auto IV



It'll have gained from the extra development time, but probably even more from the fact we'll have time to play it by next spring. We hope the soundtrack delivers.

360, PS3, TAKE-TWO

Bustin' makes me feel good

But at what cost?



It's hard to not get excited by the prospect of fighting old Stay Puft off the side of a New York skyscraper – but does this nostalgia come at the expense of the games themselves, and of trapping creators and players in endless cycles?

This month we look at *Ghostbusters* – not 'merely' a tie-in, but the true sequel to *Ghostbusters 2*. It's an appealing concept, casting you as a new recruit to the ghostbusting team in a new instalment scripted by the original creators. Then there's *Age Of Conan* – an MMOG set in the universe of the Conan stories, where Conan himself will exist, but be largely a background presence to your own foraging in that particular myth-wood. These games aren't the first to look at their fictional roots as beginnings rather than ends in themselves, but results so far haven't been great.

There are exceptions, of course, and games as a whole have benefited from the thoughtful translation of rich fictional concepts into playable mechanics: *Dune II* not only took the basic premise of *Dune* further, but in extending that fiction created the first realtime strategy game as we know it, introducing standards such as mouse control over units, resource gathering and base building. All too often, it goes the other way: *Enter The Matrix* was an uninspired game that failed to deliver on its promise

of recreating the often stunning cinematography of the films, and at the same time hobbled a cinematic tie-in which had to provide set-up scenes for the cash-in game.

So on which side of the fence will the *Ghostbusters* game fall? The over-dependence in screenshots of Slimer and the Stay Puft marshmallow man (reduced to gloop in the first film) suggests that there's not enough confidence to produce new characters and situations that might excite the fans as much as the old ones did. But, goes the argument, the preview reactions and shop receipts will prove exactly what players want – and, in this case, they may want a *Ghostbusters* game that recycles the excitement of the first time around.

It's an issue that puts game developers between a rock and a hard place. If nothing else, *Ghostbusters* shows why the oft-heard mantra of 'strip the licence away and what have you got?' misses the point: the licence is the reason for the game existing at all and, arguably, the ambition and quality of the game will be exactly what that group of fans want – and what they deserve.

32

Burnout Paradise

360, PS3

34

Age Of Conan: Hyborian Adventures

360, PC

36

Ghostbusters

360, DS, PC, PS2, PS3, Wii

37

Ferrari Championship

DS, PS3, PSP, Wii

37

Final Fantasy Tactics A2: The Sealed Grimoire

DS

38

Dark Messiah Of Might And Magic: Elements

360

38

Dark Sector

360, PS3

42

Geometry Wars Galaxies

DS, Wii

43

Pain

PS3

43

Panzer Tactics DS

DS

44

Fragile: Sayonara Tsuki No Haikyo

Wii

44

Minna De Asobou De! Namco Carnival

Wii

FORMAT: 360, PS3
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: CRITERION GAMES
ORIGIN: UK
RELEASE: JANUARY
PREVIOUSLY IN: E179



This is driving

It's rare to see a producer holding a Sixaxis at a preview event for a multiformat game, but Channon does; Criterion has broken with conventional wisdom by choosing PS3 as its lead platform. If you squint at it you might say the PS3 *Paradise* looked sharper, but the truth is both versions run perfectly at a silk-smooth 60fps. The real benefit, says Channon, was in avoiding the problematic 360-to-PS3 conversion that so many other studios are struggling with. "We've always lead on the Sony platform with *Burnout*; we've always had a good relationship with Sony. We love the PS3 and we're a big supporter of it. We made the decision right from the beginning, and I think it's paid massive dividends, because we've got a great 360 product as well, with no issues going between the platforms at all, which other developers going the other way have."

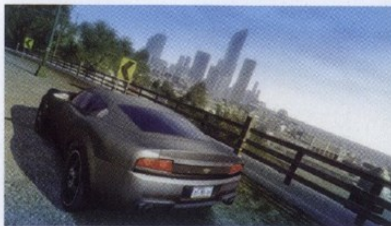
Burnout Paradise

Criterion finds paradise in a free-form *Burnout*, but will players get lost in it?

We desperately didn't want to put an arrow in the game," says Criterion's Nick Channon, senior producer on *Burnout Paradise*. And, saving lane pre-selections on the tarmac – which you are naturally expected to ignore as you weave through oncoming traffic, grind opponents into walls, smash and squeal your way across intersections – they haven't. There are no flashing barriers guiding you towards the next sweeping drift or hairy right angle.

There isn't even a *Test Drive Unlimited*-style GPS guiding you to the next race, or to the finish line. As open-world racers go, *Burnout Paradise* makes the rest look closed.

It's a bold move for the most arcade-inflected racing series this side of *OutRun*. *Burnout* is associated with a tightly orchestrated headlong charge from A to B,



Burnout is associated with a tightly orchestrated headlong charge from A to B, a game that pulls you into the screen, a game where your focus is just forward, faster, further

a game that pulls you into the screen, a game where your focus is just forward, faster, further. It's an unlikely candidate for free-form, open-ended exploration. But once Criterion had decided to make the leap – and in the studio's mind, there was no other way to create a truly next-generation *Burnout* – it refused to compromise on a single detail.

So, there are no arrows. There aren't even any courses. Races, car-specific sprints and the new Marked Man events have a start and a finish line, and it's up to you to find the quickest path through Paradise City and its mountainous rural backwaters. Road Rage –

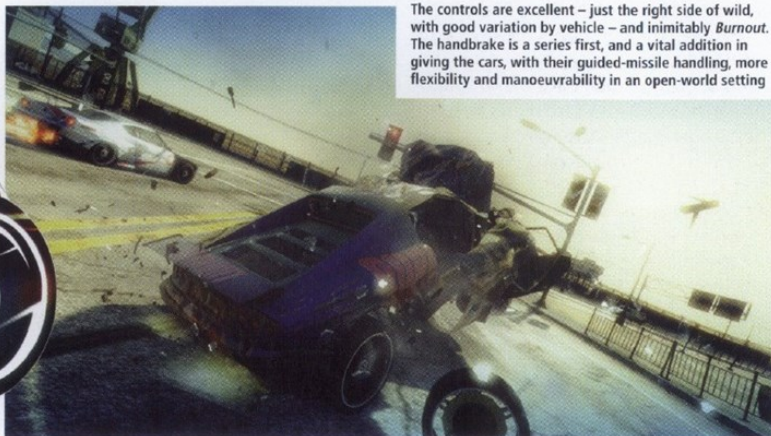
the Takedown-centred combative mode from *Burnout 3* – doesn't even have an endpoint beyond a ticking clock, your opponents scattering and converging around whatever route you choose. The new Stunt Run mode goes one further, allowing you to extend the run long after time runs out, provided you keep boosting.

The dedication to complete freedom of choice extends to the game's structure. All of the 120 events are available from the start, with dynamic difficulty that keeps pace with you by tracking your number of wins. The game's only unlockables are the 76 cars, and in *Paradise*, even the unlock itself becomes a

game. Once unlocked, most cars are released into the city and must be hunted and taken down before they can be accessed from the drive-through junkyards that allow you to change vehicle.

The junkyards are part of Criterion's staunch refusal to include a front-end, a loading screen or anything at all that breaks the player's experience. Everything in *Paradise* has a physical location, and there are no shortcuts beyond the ramp-littered back alleys. That means no instant restarts for events – either pick something else, or trek back – and a certain amount of planning if you want to pick a certain car for a certain event. And you will: *Paradise* boils the car selection down to three distinct classes with distinct boost rules, modelled on previous versions of the game. The self-explanatory Speed class follows *Burnout 2*'s boost-

The controls are excellent – just the right side of wild, with good variation by vehicle – and inimitably *Burnout*. The handbrake is a series first, and a vital addition in giving the cars, with their guided-missile handling, more flexibility and manoeuvrability in an open-world setting





Many cars, borough and street names hark back to previous *Burnouts*. With its variety of play styles and boost rules, *Paradise* is clearly hoping to be all things to all *Burnout* fans, which would be a first – everyone loves *Burnout*, but everyone also has pretty strong opinions on which is the best



It's now possible to get involved in an enormous, slow-motion wreck and still drive away, provided you have four wheels on your car. The exaggerated damage modelling is superb, but can be instantly smoothed away by driving through any of *Paradise* City's many repair shops



chaining model, while Aggression and Stunt cars are stronger, modelled on the more recent games and gaining most boost from their respective driving styles. The controversial traffic-checking of *Revenge* is present, but reined in and only available in the strongest cars. To some extent, *Paradise* allows you to choose which of the previous *Burnouts* you want to play.

Fearing that all this freedom could be overwhelming, Criterion has chosen to restrict it in one notable way: size. By open-world standards this is a small game, a fraction of the extent of *TDU's* Oahu. Channon reckons it can be crossed from east to west in seven minutes flat. Getting to know every inch of it is the key, learning the best back-routes to avoid the black cars that hunt you down in *Marked Man*, and the best places to chain stunts. To ease the burden on players' memories, there are only eight finish lines across the game's plethora of events.

The relatively small map is densely packed with opportunities for play. Beyond the events at every junction there are 400 gates and 120 billboards to smash through, 'super jumps' to find, multi-storey car parks to climb and dive from, and handbrake-turn 'power parking' opportunities. Crash mode has become Showtime, an almost comedic slow-motion carnage mode which can be initiated at any point by pressing the two bumpers; Channon accurately describes its addictive, extended bouncing and tagging as "car Katamari". Showtime records and timed runs for every street in the city can be entered on leaderboards by turning on 'road rules'.

These ever-present minigames will prove particularly moreish in *Paradise's*

astonishingly seamless, interface-free online multiplayer. Friends can be invited, while driving, with a couple of button presses, and suddenly you're sharing a world; with eightplayer Showtime, scoreboard competitions, user-created events and two-, four- and eightplayer co-op challenges, it's easy to see hours of sociable mucking around passing without a single structured event. Camera owners will treat their opponents to furious mugshots with every Takedown.

It's in this social context that *Paradise's* impressively libertarian philosophy makes perfect sense. Outside of that, it still shows immense dedication, ambition and bravery – not to mention technical achievement – in producing such a slick, explosive and blisteringly fast game, and moreover one that is instantly recognisable to eyes and thumbs alike as pure *Burnout*, within such

an intimidatingly loose framework. However, you have to wonder whether it can sustain the series' legendary intensity and focus in singleplayer. Aimlessness, confusion and practical frustration at the difficulty of car changes and event restarts began to creep in during our short playtest; variety of events, and in the world itself, are also concerns. But even if only the online multiplayer fulfils its potential, *Paradise* will be a brave new world in sandbox play.



A smart street-name indicator at the top of the screen helps you keep your bearings, and is the one concession to route-finding in the entirely open racing. Turns you might want to take are indicated with a subtle flash



FORMAT: 360, PC
PUBLISHER: EIDOS
DEVELOPER: FUNCOM
ORIGIN: NORWAY
RELEASE: 2008
PREVIOUSLY IN: E177

Age Of Conan: Hyborean Adventures

Funcom's use of the Conan licence has taken the MMOG in a distinctively violent and bawdy direction – but this isn't the only way it breaks from the genre's conventions



One of the most immediately striking things about the game is its sumptuous score. In fact, the audio direction in general is rather good, making great use of 5.1 surround sound



Ripped pecs and architects

Age Of Conan will also feature the ability to build guild cities at higher levels of play, although the exact mechanism for this remains a mystery. What we did hear about it whetted our appetite – guilds can own resources, creating an economic motive for warfare, as the domination of these is interlinked with crafting and tradeskills. As with Funcom's promise of some visceral combat, implementation is the key, however. Aside from this, there is the possibility of PvP – our capture-the-flag game proved to be a surprisingly frenetic affair, with mastery of your aggressive and defensive stances, health potions, combos and stamina adding some tactics to the mayhem; no doubt a more organised team could exploit the balance of classes to better effect, too.

You might not notice from the screenshots – barbarians, giants and demons are ten-a-penny in the fantasy-sodden MMOG genre, after all – but getting hands-on with Funcom's latest you quickly realise that it tries to do a number of things in an unorthodox manner. The opening portion of the game sees your character, a former slave, washed up on the shores of the tropical island Tortage after a storm scuppers a prison vessel. After a brief tutorial mission in which you free a flimsily clad damsel and clobber piratical goons with a piece of driftwood, you work your way inland towards Tortage's city and find yourself inveigled in a conspiracy to fight an authoritarian occupation while pursuing the larger goal of your heroic destiny.

Aside from the above-average quality of its storytelling, the major difference with other MMOGs is that much of this isn't multiplayer at all – originally, this entire section was intended to be singleplayer only, ensuring that newbies were comprehensively tutored in the ways of low-level battle before being unleashed into the wider, multiplayer world. This has now been replaced by a compromise, however: during the day, Tortage is multiplayer, allowing you to perform quests socially that don't affect the advancement of the story; at night time, a state which you initiate by sleeping, the game becomes instanced and effectively singleplayer. It's here that you drive your character through the overall campaign – and by dislocating the real narrative progress



Conversations with NPCs take the form of close-up cinematic cutscenes – another convention borrowed from singleplayer RPGs to give *Age Of Conan* a feeling of personal involvement often lacking from MMOGs

from the daytime multiplayer setting, *Age Of Conan* is able to create more dramatic quests with more profound repercussions than if it had to juggle this with a persistently player-populated world. As such, the game delivers more than kill and fetch quests, and establishes motivations through elaborate dialogue trees, taking notes from the more fleshy tales employed in singleplayer RPGs. Whether this quality is maintained after Tortage and the singleplayer component ends remains to be seen; the higher levels into which we were dropped seemed to fall back into familiar territory – collect quests that had you wandering through marshes to harvest silk from giant spiders.

One other radical idea seen in previous demonstrations is now in flux. It was previously mooted that major elements of character advancement would be deferred until the Tortage section is complete. On the slave boat, the player is able to choose his appearance, selecting from three human races which have no gameplay impact, using an *Oblivion*-esque creation tool to morph the features into a massive variety of uniquely hideous faces. Choosing a class, however, was to come at level five and other choices later still, offering further development and affecting the player's abilities with crafting and city-building. Following beta feedback, this is no longer the case, with the player choosing his main class at level one – although it is stressed that this may change again before launch. While it's a shame to see Funcom step away from a unique idea, it is doing so in order to give players what they want and, at the very least, it avoids the issue of whether secondary characters are forced to play through an identical opening section.

In line with *Tabula Rasa* and *Hellgate: London*'s attempts to bring visceral combat to the MMOG, *Age Of Conan* has eschewed the familiar formula of lock-on and auto-attack. Instead, the game uses a mixture of



Interestingly, the developers have chosen to tone down the special attacks, or feats. In doing so, the player selects feats that fit his or her style rather than having obvious choices

directional attacks on the number keys and a simplified combo system. Each opponent has a different resilience to attacks from the left, right and above – indicated by the number of white bars that enclose the character on these sides, becoming visible only when the character is highlighted by the cursor. These defensive capabilities can be spontaneously

meaning that you can do neither perfectly at any one time. The number keys take your fingers from the movement commands, and the mouse can't be used to rotate the view when clicking on the icon bar – it's no huge problem in terms of successfully controlling your character, but it feels inapposite and fiddlesome, undercutting Funcom's attempts

It would be a shame if *Age Of Conan* were to be let down by the potentially poor implementation of its otherwise perfectly good intentions; visceral combat is a more than welcome spin on MMOG convention, which often seems to demote a sense of involvement below statistical management. Certainly, it seems Funcom has a handle on Conan's world, and this adaptation replicates not just the sex and violence of the fiction, but also some of its articulacy and depth. We hope that it can create a consistently rich experience across all levels of play.

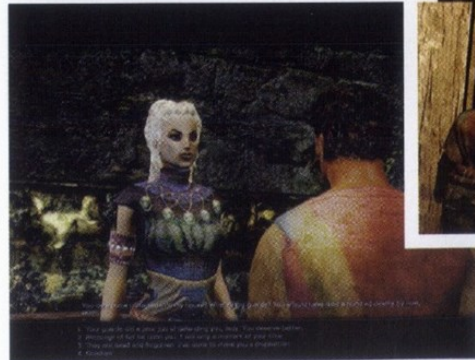


It seems Funcom has a handle on Conan's world, and this adaptation replicates not just the sex and violence of the fiction, but also some of its articulacy and depth

swapped, however, forcing players to constantly switch between these three attacks. Adding to this is the combo system – initiated either by higher number keys or from an icon bar along the base of the screen. Once clicked, you are required to press the directional attack buttons in a sequence flashed onscreen. Then there are defensive and aggressive stances to manage, along with health potions – some of which take more instantaneous effect than others.

It's just a little tricky to manage – not because of the complexity of these combos but because the layout of the controls distributes movement and attack functionality across both of your hands,

to deliver a more direct sense of violence than other MMOGs. The necessity to initiate each attack, in combination with the need to swap stances, activate combos and drink potions, feels a little contradictory – rather than making the player enjoy control of each blow, there is a sense that you are merely micromanaging something more fluidly described by the indirect control of other MMOGs. However, it's worth noting that such things have changed dramatically since we last saw the game in July, and undoubtedly Funcom will continue to toy with other control configurations – hopefully finding ones which will better convey a sense of the player's involvement in battle.



Funcom has tried to avoid presenting NPCs as quest vendors. Instead, many have their own realistic schedules and places of interest, like the inn above, creating the impression of a living world

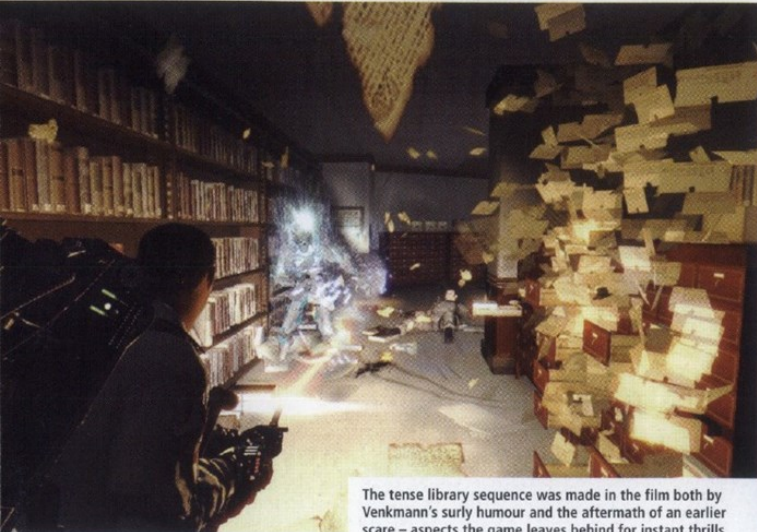
FORMAT: 360, DS, PC, PS2, PS3, Wii
 PUBLISHER: SIERRA ENTERTAINMENT
 DEVELOPER: RED FLY STUDIO (DS, PS2, Wii),
 TERMINAL REALITY (360, PC, PS3)
 ORIGIN: US
 RELEASE: Q4 2008

Ghostbusters

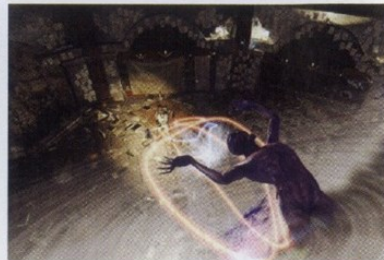
Alleged ghost sightings and related supernatural occurrences have been reported across all formats



Some of the lighting effects, particularly the proton beams, look even more fantastic in motion – and the panicked movement of ghosts when trying to escape the beams leads to some chaotic and messy environment destruction



The tense library sequence was made in the film both by Venkman's surly humour and the aftermath of an earlier scare – aspects the game leaves behind for instant thrills



Well, it didn't look like the third movie was happening anytime soon. Under cross-platform development from Terminal Reality and Red Fly Studio, *Ghostbusters* is a return for the original cast and writers after more than two decades, and a new canonical entry in one of the finest supernatural comedies ever made.

The game sees you cast as a new recruit to the classic *Ghostbusters* team, who are capitalising on their knack of saving the world in the nick of time by expanding the business. From here, the game seems to go back over significant old ground as well some new backstories and scenarios. Several monsters are associated with Gozer, the first film's head ghost, and have a design inspired by that particular cod-Aztec symbolism, and of course the ghosts will be the real stars of the show. As well as the aforementioned, familiar faces like the Librarian, Slimer and Stay Puft return, and new nasties include

ghosts forming themselves out of books, neon blue tubes of teeth roaming the streets, sinister gargoyles, and dog-like apparitions.

In place to bust them is the original (and best) equipment – the 'unlicensed nuclear accelerator', or proton pack; the ghost trap for weakened ghosts; the PKE meter which in the game gives information on the targets, and even Ecto 1. Sadly, preliminary reports suggest you don't get to take it for a spin, but perhaps such single-minded focus will prove the right decision.

Locations range from the obvious to the inspired, and include a graveyard full of fog and encrusted headstones, the library from the first film recreated in painstaking architectural detail (though sadly there's no variety in the books), and best of all the hotel banquet room where the team first encountered Slimer, complete with fully destructible table layouts and wallpaper. As well as this, you'll try to stop Stay Puft's ascent up a skyscraper while suspended above him on a cord, admire the view of a

castle crammed full of ghosts, and explore sewers that seem to be crammed full of effluent monsters.

It should be emphasised that Red Fly Studio's Wii version will be significantly different from the detailed glory of Terminal Reality's game, with more stylised characters and the proton beam mapped to the Wii Remote (and, brilliantly, the ghost trap activated by pushing the Nunchuk forwards). Nothing above the singleplayer has been confirmed for 360, PC and PS3, but the Wii version will feature multiplayer modes including 'Ghosts vs Busters' in which players can play as either in a face-off (the ghosts have the ability to move through walls and slime the *Ghostbusters*) or in a competitive ghost-catching mode.

The only aspect of the game yet to be shown off is perhaps the most important: the script and its humour. But with the original cast back on board, and the obvious appeal of being a *Ghostbuster*, this could be one of 2008's more worthwhile rides.



Who you gonna call?

As well as being written by the same team behind the movies, *Ghostbusters* will feature the voices of the original film cast, including of course Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd, Harold Ramis and Ernie Hudson. The game is set in the '90s, two years after the events of *Ghostbusters II*, and centres on New York finally beginning to embrace Gozer (specifically, a museum dedicated to the art and architecture of his historical period is about to open), which sounds authentically like the kind of perverse thing that could happen in the real world. The game has no connection, however, to the oft-mooted 'Ghostbusters in Hell' script that exists for the third film, or the gameplay demo, if that's what it was, that leaked from Zoofly earlier in the year.



Looks like the boys are coming close to crossing the streams here – causing 'total protonic reversal' in Egon's words, and inevitably the game over screen

Ferrari Championship

Shiny red cars racing in the rain, with plenty of licence on show

The Ferrari Challenge is an annual series based entirely around a particular model of Ferrari, which changes each year, and makes a distinction between professional racers and 'gentleman drivers'. *Ferrari Challenge* has a similar dichotomy: it screams 'associated product' from the badge on the box to the track hoardings, but also has ambitions of being a comprehensive simulation within those limits.

It certainly looks the part. Although great-looking driving games are hardly uncommon on the current generation of home consoles, *Ferrari Challenge's* cars are very well modelled and the tracks are perfect replicas of their real-world counterparts. And there's no point in denying the vicarious thrill in bombing around in a perfectly polished Ferrari that's beyond most wallets.

The handling of the cars is equally faithful, the limits of sticking to one manufacturer's roster overcome by an almost obsessive attention to the differences in handling between the various Ferrari models. In some cases, such as tweaks between variants of the same model, it seems much of



a muchness. But beyond that, the cars are distinctive enough that each race (in the *Ferrari Challenge*, the same cars race each other) has noticeable differences.

Tweaking the handling parameters allows the game to be played as a relatively straightforward racer or an unforgiving simulator, and the effect of certain on/off options is obvious and welcome. If the idea of a good simulator with a slew of Ferraris appeals, this might be for you – but if the thought of playing with manual gears makes you weep, and you're queasy about paying for a game full of product placement, it's perhaps better to drive on by.



The handling has been overseen and was demoed to us by Bruno Senna, nephew of the late Ayrton. The F1 driver apparently once returned from Japan with the Master System's Ayrton Senna's *Super Monaco GP II* and, upon being roundly trounced by his young nephews, insisted they had been cheating and wouldn't play the game again

HYPE

FORMAT: DS, PS3, PSP, Wii
PUBLISHER: SYSTEM 3
DEVELOPER: EUTECHNYX
ORIGIN: UK
RELEASE: FEBRUARY

Final Fantasy Tactics A2: The Sealed Grimoire

Baffled by multiple tactics games? Bemused by the Final Fantasy universe? This could be the place to begin

The clue is in the title: *Final Fantasy Tactics A2* picks up where *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance* left off, instead of taking the series' forebear, *Final Fantasy Tactics*, as its starting point. For the benefit of anybody unfamiliar with pre-PSP Ivalice, that means a wider selection of playable races, a more involved and engaging career progression and skill structure, a more interesting quest system, a customisable world map, and the return of judges, who

lay down the law on the battlefield with an impervious steely will. It also begins as the GBA game began: with the youthful protagonist (in this case a young boy called Luso) discovering a grimoire that transports him to the world of Ivalice.

The difference is that, this time around, Ivalice contains even more jobs, playable races and quest types, and crisper, more assured visuals – although three games in, navigation of the battle map can still cause problems when things get a bit congested. Gaming theologians will no doubt question whether the game takes place in the 'real' Ivalice of the original *Tactics* and *FFXII*, or the 'imagined' world of *Tactics Advance*. The answer is probably beyond mortal comprehension, though Vaan and Penelo (last seen in *Revenant Wings*, see p85) do put in an appearance.

Apart from that, it's business as usual – which, as anyone who lost hundreds of hours to the GBA original can attest, is excellent news. For anybody who didn't have that pleasure, *The Sealed Grimoire* looks like a perfect starting point.

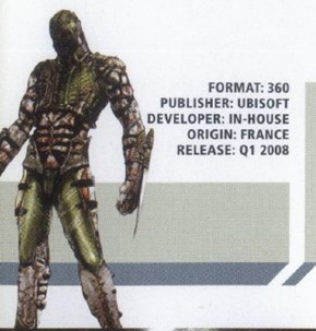


All of the playable races from the original *Tactics Advance* return, including Humes and Bangaa (shown here). They're joined by a couple of new ones though: the porcine Seeq and dragonish Gria. And a cockatrice, or five

FORMAT: DS
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
ORIGIN: JAPAN
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK, US)



After visiting the pub and kitting out your clan, you're able to pick and choose from various different quests to undertake. As in the original game, successful completion of them will allow you to place locations on the map



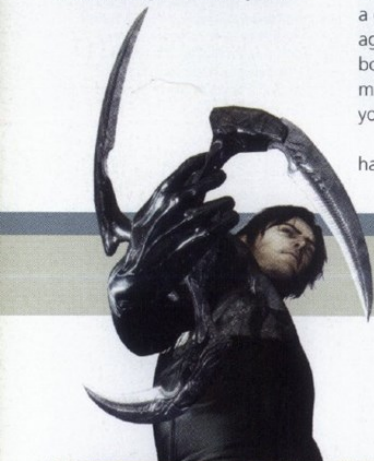
FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
ORIGIN: FRANCE
RELEASE: Q1 2008

Dark Messiah Of Might And Magic: Elements

Ubisoft puts the boot in to Xbox 360 with a port of Arkane's PC fantasy-action game



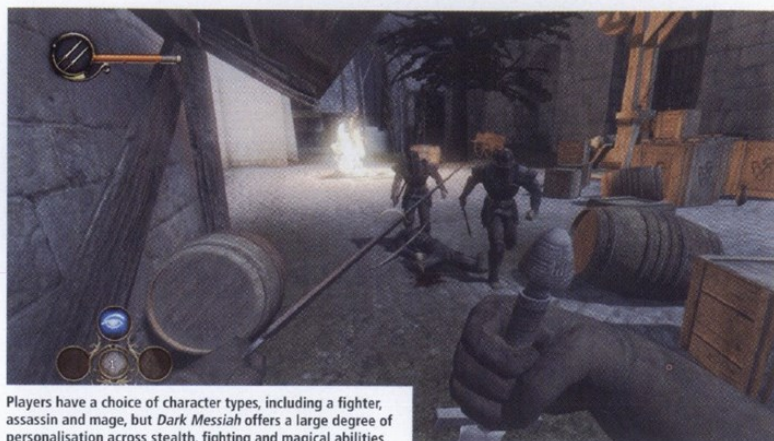
Environments usually feature one or two elements that can be employed to kill foes – spikes, fires and precariously built barrel-covered porches do the job well



For all its ungainly imprecision, *Oblivion* is still the measure of firstperson melee fighting on Xbox 360. On the PC, the bar was raised in late 2006 by Arkane Studios' *Dark Messiah*, which added a kick and some welcome physicality to *Oblivion*'s tedious back-and-forth duels. Physics modelling allowed you to knock your adversaries to the ground or into hazards such as walls decorated with spikes.

The remapping of its controls for 360 is still the best attempt to model up-close melee fighting on the platform. Quick blows are initiated with brief presses of the right trigger and power blows through holding it down for a second or two. Blocking is executed by holding the left trigger, and a kick by pressing both at once. It's an elegant system that enables a defensive battle to quickly turn into aggressive with the quick application of the boot, as well as allowing you to manage multiple attackers by kicking one back so you can deal with the other.

The new version has been given a handful of tweaks and additions, including a



Players have a choice of character types, including a fighter, assassin and mage, but *Dark Messiah* offers a large degree of personalisation across stealth, fighting and magical abilities

joypad-friendly lock-on system, four new singleplayer levels, and new maps for its multiplayer mode, but it's otherwise true to the original PC version. Unfortunately, time hasn't been terribly kind to *Dark Messiah*. After looking sprightly for the 360 version of *The Orange Box*, Source is looking tired here.

And despite the involvement of *Half-Life 2*'s art director, *Dark Messiah* doesn't quite have the same calibre of visual design.

Still, there's much about *Dark Messiah*'s physics-enabled fantasy world to find attractive, and there's little else like it on Xbox 360.



Dark Sector

Run, take cover, aim and fire: Digital Extremes wears its influences on its glaive



FORMAT: 360, PS3
PUBLISHER: D3
DEVELOPER: DIGITAL EXTREMES
ORIGIN: CANADA
RELEASE: TBA



From its sci-fi origins in deep space, to the grungy, Eastern Bloc of the near-future – *Dark Sector* has undergone some dramatic changes since its inception, but has shown itself only rarely. Ordinarily an excuse to reach for the alarm bell – but not so in this case. The technology behind Digital Extremes' Evolution Engine is undoubtedly robust – which is to be expected given its pedigree and wealth of experience developing *Unreal Tournament 2003* and *2004* – and since we last saw it earlier in the year, *Dark Sector* has quietly improved and continued to show promise.



Your character's backstory (an agent trying to stop the spread of a lethal mutagen) is told through the game's bleak opening

While its influences are quite obvious – it doesn't take a particularly discerning eye to pick out *Gears Of War*'s 'roadie run' or innumerable nods to *Resident Evil 4* – it can't be accused of failing to introduce its own ideas. First and foremost is the Glaive, Hayden Tenno's boomerang-like blade which can be used for stealing opponents' weapons, lopping off limbs and, more interestingly, can be charged with fire or electricity from broken lights to increase its effectiveness or solve environmental puzzles.

Our concerns earlier in the year seem to have been addressed, too. Wayward aiming has been tightened immeasurably, making gun combat far less frustrating and more effective at range. The Glaive's vicious potency has also been reduced (presumably to ensure players don't ignore the other weapons) and it is now possible to dual-wield it – again, keeping the delicate balance between weapon types in check.

With the added polish that the remaining months in development will allow, it's difficult to imagine *Dark Sector* stumbling too badly at this point.



ONE ORDINARY MAN

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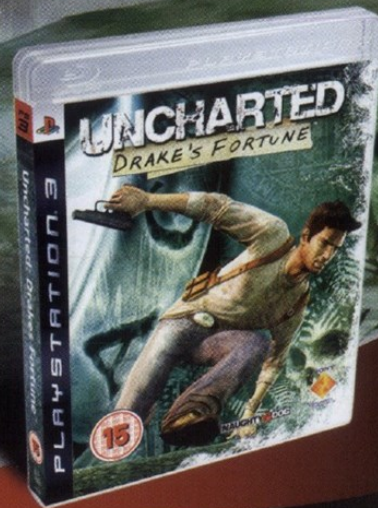
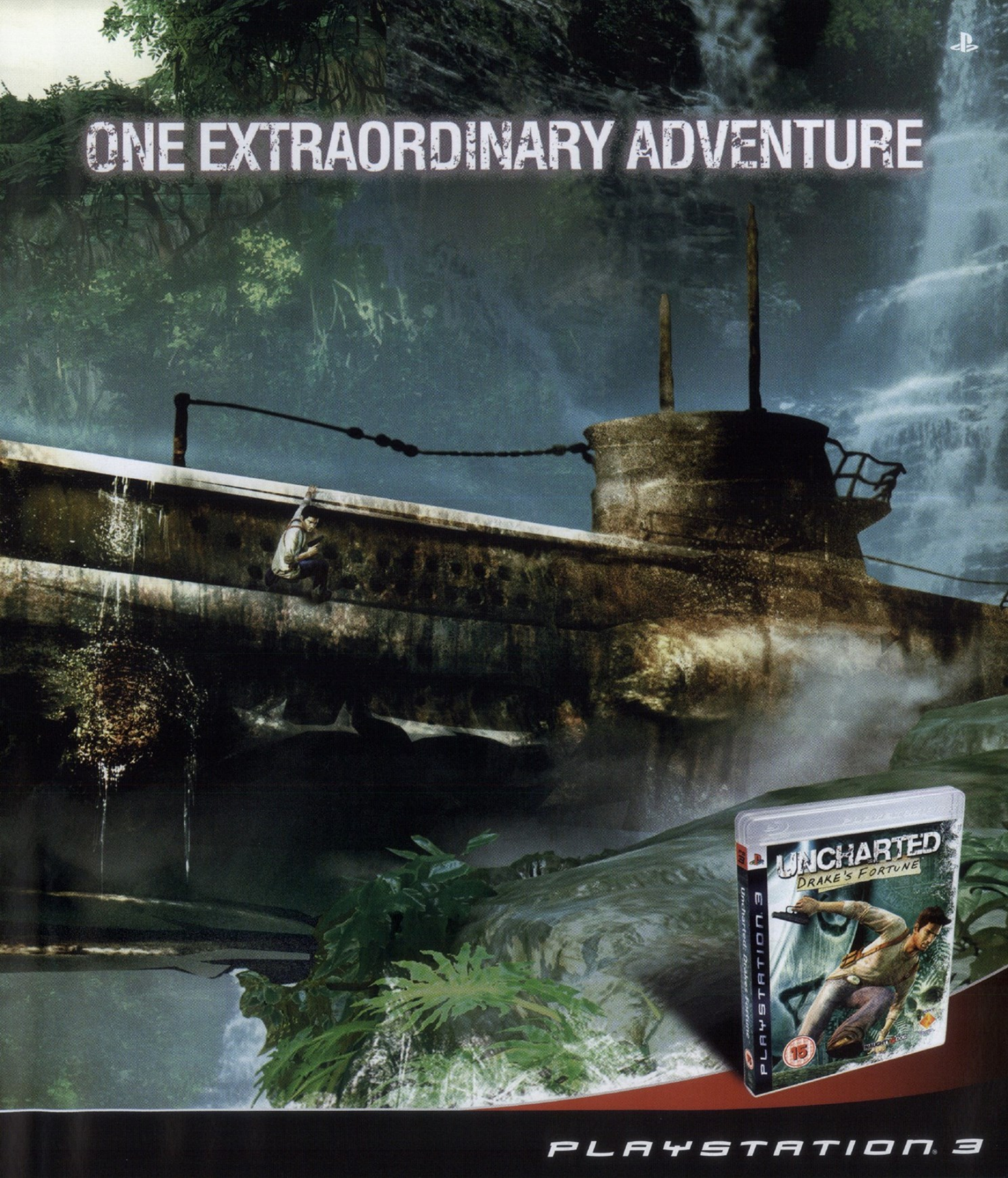
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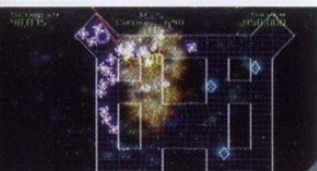


PLAYSTATION 3

FORMAT: DS, Wii
 PUBLISHER: SIERRA
 DEVELOPER: KUJU
 ORIGIN: UK
 RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), JANUARY (UK)
 PREVIOUSLY IN: E178

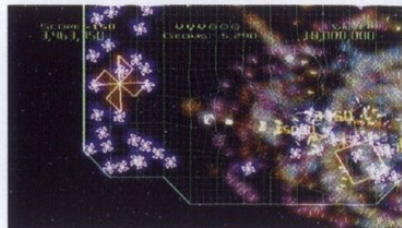
Geometry Wars Galaxies

Will new ways to play mean twin sticks have had their day?



Angle of influence

For all their aesthetic austerity, several of *Galaxies'* levels are actually directly inspired by arcade classics like *Asteroids*, with large enemies that break into smaller ones under fire; *Pac-Man*, in which you're confined within a maze of tight corridors; and a more recent game, *Every Extend*. In this level, mines explode in blasts that are harmless to your ship, but trigger their neighbouring mines and destroy enemy ships for score bonuses. How Kuju has twisted the structure of *Geometry Wars* into resembling this variety of play styles brings a wry smile to your face.



Some levels are markedly better than others for collecting geoms, such as the *Asteroids*-themed varieties, because the enemies tend to drop them in large, easy-to-collect clumps

It's a big claim, but Kuju reckons that Remote controls for its expanded Wii port of Bizarre Creations' austere shooter classic are better than twin sticks. The highest score achieved by testers is apparently 21 billion, and it was scored with the Remote. And producer Roger Carpenter is adamant that the learning curve for new players with the new control scheme is exactly the same as it is for twin sticks.

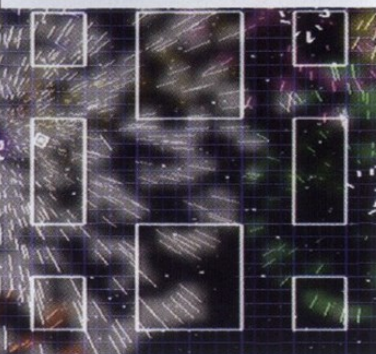
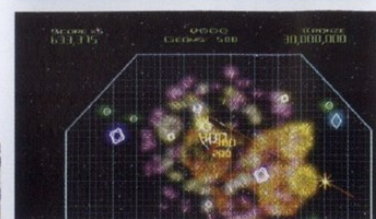
Certainly, an extended play through many of its levels proves that despite the scheme initially feeling awkwardly loose, it quickly proves faster and more flexible than the twin-stick setup. In singleplayer mode, the ship remains at the centre of the screen, with shots aimed toward the Remote pointer, denoted by a star and a red sight line. It's quickly obvious how essential it is to aim tightly into the centre of the screen, so that it's quicker to change shot direction. The challenge from that point on is to retain that



One of *Retro Evolved's* subtlest, yet most important, features was how quick it was to restart a game, yet *Galaxies* unfortunately favours a short but ultimately faintly irritating animation of the playfield warping out of a wireframe

close control as the action heats up into the struggle to control the chaos of spawning enemies that is the series' hallmark, a challenge that slowly but satisfyingly becomes second nature.

The DS version is fundamentally identical to the Wii one, but runs at half the framerate (up to 60 on Wii) and is slowed to support the less accurate control over movement afforded by the D-pad. Aiming is set by default to dragging the stylus over the touchscreen, with the action unfolding on the upper one, but there's an option to play on the touchscreen as well, and another to



aim using the face buttons. The Wii version is similarly flexible in supporting the Classic Controller's twin sticks.

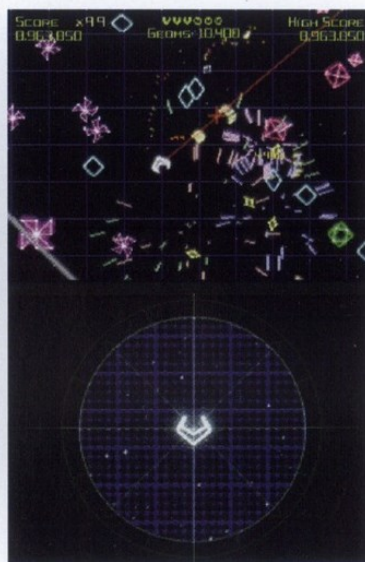
The levels themselves prove remarkably varied, with new additions to *Geometry Wars* canon, such as minelayers, gravity wells, moving walls and enemy generators, managing to add novelty without being gimmicks. Each level is a different combination of playfield shape and size, enemy spawn patterns, and life and bomb loadouts that, in true *Geometry Wars* fashion, offer potentially infinite play and a good range of strategies, from the careful accretion of enemies before triggering mines to take them out for large score bonuses to manoeuvring around shot-obstructing moving blocks.

Stringing these innovations together is a reprise of the geom score bonus system introduced in *PGR4's Waves*. Geoms, which are collected from destroyed enemies, will also buy new collections of levels and ship helpers. Helpers are invulnerable drones that have specific behaviours, including shooting in the same direction (attack), opposite (defend), collecting geoms, snipe, and sweep, where it revolves around your ship as cover. Using them in sessions levels them up so that they're more effective, but the system is hard to reconcile with *Geometry Wars'* hard-scoring ethic – surely skill alone should dictate score, not time spent.

Such quibbles aside, *Galaxies* continues to impress with the expansiveness of its range of play options, how solid each one feels to play, and yet how honestly it keeps to its roots.



DS *Galaxies* runs slower than the Wii version to relieve expectations that the D-pad will perform as well as the Nunchuk. We found that after a few plays the slower action was allowing us to ramp up higher scores



Pain

Flinging controllers at walls was never like this

As an exercise in wringing every last bit of potential from a premise, *Pain* is some sort of a work of art. The simple union of catapult, physics and wacky city setting is the basis of a score-attack game: choose your launch angle and power and let fly your ragdoll protagonist to cause as much damage to him and his environment as possible.

Yet, somehow, *Pain* manages to find a use for every button on the Sixaxis. The left stick controls some *Burnout 3*-style aftertouch once airborne; the D-pad supplies 'Ooch', giving you up to four twitches once



The main character is a yapping aficionado of extreme sports and Jackass. Other unlockable characters include Santa and his busty assistant, with a selection of outfits



your human payload has hit the ground to maximise his breakages; a shake of the Sixaxis gives Super Ooch, a more powerful form of the same idea. While in flight, you can also have your character strike one of several terribly amusing poses for extra points and, by holding a face button, cling on to bits of the scenery to help topple rickety scaffolding, roll along with a huge dislodged bowling ball, or even to hold and then throw many smaller objects, like explosive boxes.

Along with the replay, restart and reset options, each also given a button, it's remarkably complex stuff. Not entirely luckily, there's a painfully (ahem) extended tutorial, which you have to play through to access the main game modes. It all seems a bit much when the essential gameplay is about smashing stuff up with a decidedly juvenile sense of humour.



The singleplayer modes include Painedemonium, the basic smash-for-points game, Spank the Monkey, a somewhat tedious mode in which the character has to hit a set sequence of monkeys in as short a time as possible, and Mime Toss, in which the character must grab a mime artist before throwing him at panes of glass. It's hard to escape the feeling that it's all little more than a fleshy rehash of *Burnout's* Crash mode; next issue's review should clear it all up.



The level of humour is at the level of visual details such as a 'Me rub you long time' sign in a massage parlour window, a club called The Manhole and the above score bonus. We're not convinced that it mines any previously unknown Oscar Wilde works



Panzer Tactics DS

Will the DS's first WWII strategy game put Advance Wars to rout?



Panzer Tactics DS will consist of three campaigns playing as the Axis, whose campaign begins with the taking of Warsaw, the Soviets and Allies. Multiplayer is handled by a fourplayer wifi mode and twoplayer DS-swapping

It's at times like these that you realise just how easy it is to wage war in *Advance Wars*. From checking movement and fire ranges to deploying new units, its interface is extremely well designed. So well, in fact, that it's mystifying that *Panzer Tactics DS* hasn't been able to replicate it, despite attempting to do so.

It might have something to do with the fact that *Panzer Tactics'* heritage is a mix of *Advance Wars* and traditional hex-based strategy games. So it has AW-style terrain types that affect defence and movement, currency to spend on building new units won from capturing cities, and its rock-paper-scissors relationships between unit types.

But it brings to the format a hex grid and such features as the ability to create multiple new units per turn, maps based on real-world locations, weather effects such as storms preventing air units from attacking, and, most significantly, units that you've built gaining increased capabilities through experience. These units, referred to as 'core' units (lose over a certain number and you'll lose the battle), are persistent between



The hexagonal tiles bring back memories of games such as *Battle Isle*. And you thought we'd seen the last of them

missions, meaning that success is as much down to getting units through unscathed as it is to achieving objectives. You can further increase abilities and effectiveness through assigning officers to units, which also boosts those of adjacently placed ones. Watch out for commandos, however, because they can kill off officers. In total, it features around 150 different land, air and sea units.

The result is a much more complex tactical game than *Advance Wars*, but it's hard to say at this stage whether under its veneer of historical authenticity it will prove as deeply involving. Hopefully, its convoluted interface becomes more palatable over time, but first impressions suggest that AW's perfect alchemy of simplicity and intricacy won't be challenged.

FORMAT: DS
PUBLISHER: 10TACLE STUDIOS
DEVELOPER: SPROING
ORIGIN: AUSTRIA
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)



Encounters between opposing units are often frustratingly drawn-out affairs, each attack only chipping down health

FORMAT: Wii
PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO
DEVELOPER: TRI-CRESCENDO
ORIGIN: JAPAN
RELEASE: 2008

Fragile: Sayonara Tsuki No Haikyo

The team behind *Eternal Sonata* collaborates with Namco to bring a creepy adventure game to the Wii

The screenshots of *Fragile's* desolate night-time world are a far cry from the overwhelming vivacity of *Eternal Sonata's* environments. Even the gloomiest of locales in that game bustled with foliage and colour – in the melancholic world of *Fragile*, everything is dead or gone. While this might seem to be a rather abrupt change of direction from its last game, tri-Crescendo has joined forces with the Namco team responsible for the well-respected PS2 RPGs *Venus & Braves* and *Seven*, and it is this

group that has been providing *Fragile's* foreboding art style.

Set in a post-apocalyptic future, the world has been mysteriously and suddenly deserted by the remaining human population. You control Seto, a young boy who finds himself the sole survivor of a now desolate township. Tasked with finding his friend, a girl named Heroine, he must scour the decaying buildings, discovering the evidence of their inexplicably rapid abandonment – and then uncover more sinister things lurking in the dark.

Seto's main aid during this quest is a torch, controlled directly using the Wii Remote, and with much of the game taking place at night the manipulation of light and dark will be an essential part of the gameplay. Other items such as a metal detector and a small tree branch will come into play in an as-yet-unknown manner. Little else is certain about the game, but the development team have emphasised that the title is not survival-horror, in spite of the creepy atmosphere suggested by some of the early images.



Submissions of short stories and drawings from the fan community are being used by the developer to add detail to the game's environments



The game's pervading sense of loss and moonlit world are well reflected in the subtitle, a tentative translation of which is 'Farewell Ruins Of The Moon'. Although if the moon's shining, the sun must be out there somewhere

Minna De Asobou De! Namco Carnival

Namco looks to get it on the party-game feeding frenzy with its own Pac-Man-branded minigame collection

FORMAT: Wii
PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
ORIGIN: JAPAN
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN),
TBA (US, UK)



It's not clear if Namco is hoping to attract retrogamers with this latest collection, or whether the aim is to use it to introduce the new casual gaming sector to the classics



You might think that the market would have reached saturation for minigame collections, and yet there are always new ones gambolling across the horizon, each carrying the grim prospect of cheap brand-name tie-ins and enforced merriment. The latest gaming figurehead to fall victim is *Pac-Man*, who lends his distinctive image to *Minna De Asobou De! Namco Carnival* – translating to 'Let's All Play

Together! Namco Carnival'. However, instead of using *Pac-Man's* iconic image to brand the flimsy, shallow experiences that so often pad these games, Namco has concentrated on resurrecting and compiling its classic titles.

Structured around a theme park, the game features six minigames taking inspiration from much-loved Namco games of yore. In addition, there are nine original versions of old games: *Pacmania*, *Dig Dug*, *Mappy*, *Galplus*, *Super Pac-Man*, *Xevious*, *Galaxian*, *Cutie Q* and *Pac & Pal*.

While raiding the back catalogue seems something of a lazy option, there's no doubt that at least some of these games have retained much of their initial appeal. It's difficult to get excited by a whack-a-mole clone, and *Pac-Man*, *Galaga* and *Dig Dug* have all been re-released already in various guises. Nonetheless, the prospect of fourplayer, splitscreen *Rally X* is certainly a strong draw. Besides which, when so many minigame collections struggle to find new and interesting things to do with the Remote and Nunchuk, perhaps it is just as well that Namco is looking to the past.



Some of the recreations of classic games no longer use their traditional mechanics, instead being used as a visual indicator of your success (or failure) at the minigames

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2D OR NOT 2D

**CAPCOM PUTS THE
FIGHT BACK INTO THE
FIGHTING GENRE**

The first thing I thought about," says **Yoshinori Ono**, the producer of *Street Fighter IV*, "was that I wanted to go back to *Street Fighter II*." That's a bold statement in the context of big game franchises, which despite their frequent lack of innovation are often all too eager to pay lip service to the same. It's also a problem. Where do you begin reimagining a game that not only defined a genre, but to many minds hasn't yet been bettered? "You begin by looking at the foundations of the series, to try and create something inspired by the feel, the gameplay, the atmosphere and everything about that game," insists Ono. Isn't that a little dangerous? "Yes! I'm not aiming to create a game that will be better than *SFII*, but I suppose I am aiming to follow in its footsteps. *SFII* is like a bible – every time I play it, it inspires me to strive and try harder."

Street Fighter IV was officially announced by Capcom in October, along with a trailer on the game's official website. Within hours, the volume of traffic had crashed the site, and speculation was running rampant. The level of investment people have in the series is obvious, as supporters of 3D and 2D stylings became more vociferous, and occasionally vicious, about their desired interpretation. Ono is adamant about the idea of a 3D *Street Fighter*: "No, I never had

TITLE: *STREET FIGHTER IV*
FORMAT: ARCADE, 360, PS3
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
ORIGIN: JAPAN
RELEASE: TBA



Yoshinori Ono, the producer of *Street Fighter IV*, is a Capcom and *Street Fighter* veteran, and among his more dubious accomplishments is the 'street' soundtrack for *SFIII: Third Strike*



thoughts like that – in my mind if Capcom's going to work on a 3D fighting game it should be a new IP, because it's not *Street Fighter*." Instead, *SFIV* is played on an entirely 2D plane, but with exceptionally animated 3D graphics. "I had a vision," says Ono, "of *SFIV*'s look – a moving picture that would combine with the instant controls of *SFII*. There have already been discussions about whether *SFIV* will be 2D or 3D – in my mind, it's both." But come now, in practical terms it's purely 2D. "Look at the monitor screen," insists Ono. "It's flat. 3D games are simply creating an illusion of depth, and we have that. For a player, a fighting game in 2D is hard enough, and as soon as you add the extra dimension of depth it's extremely hard, but 2D works: it makes it much easier to attack your opponent on a flat plane. I couldn't have betrayed all of the real *Street Fighter* fans, anyway. They would have killed me."

While saying all of this, Ono has moved from his chair to a monitor showing the game and back again twice, has drawn multiple characters in the air with his fingers and almost spilled a glass of water over his joystick. It's all part of an infectious enthusiasm for the game. Later, when demonstrating a new move of Ryu's, he gestures wildly before kicking the table hard in his excitement and pulling up sharply from the pain. After a brief grimace, he's straight back into explaining his ideas and forgets about it. Demonstrating an aspect of

the Ken and Ryu face-off, a coffee cup and a camera are pressed into service as the two fighters, banging each other around a little (the camera – Ryu – wins a crushing victory). Ono's entire being is composed of hand gestures at times, waving above and around his head, miming moves and opponents and almost reverentially transferring them to the joystick's buttons. Then he quickly changes into full concentration mode.

And when playing, he's rapid and aggressive, full of quick jabs, three- and four-hit combos and an infectious laugh at the absurd fun of masses of muscle knocking each other around. After his third

is taking an open-house approach to development, with some significant outsourcing. "It's not for convenience, though," Ono is quick to point out. "Those studios have people who've worked on a Capcom fighting game before. Obviously we're controlling the game's development, but some programming can be outsourced to people who have experience of these things – you can see that *SFIV* is a Capcom game all over: basically, we looked to get people involved who had made *SFII*." It's another homage to *SFII*, and perhaps the greatest in terms of substance: "It was a critical time if we wanted to get all of these talents back together for a *Street Fighter*. If we hadn't done it now, the chance may have been gone forever – so Capcom thought that the time had come. As a project manager I wanted to keep people involved who had been there from the start, and then by mixing it up with the input of the younger people within Capcom you might get something special."

***SFIV*, even at this stage, certainly looks special.** Although it bears little relation to the stunning brushwork of the trailer, the graphical style is refreshingly bright, clear, and it moves beautifully. "We've had this concept of trying to 'move the image' for a long time," says Ono. "What we're aiming at with *SFIV* is very, very high, and I want to aim that high because this is a natural evolution – prior to this, although animators and illustrators were able to draw certain

"I couldn't have betrayed all the real *Street Fighter* fans. They would have killed me"

win in a row he's laughing: "Do I have to be softer on you?" The next fight sees us grab a narrow victory, before normal service is resumed with a devastating super combo. But we take our defeat with good grace. "You Europeans are more reserved than Americans," says Ono, before laughing. "Then again, Americans are quite vulgar!" When we finally win a handful of matches, the grin remains in place, with shouts of "One more chance!" and jocular bows before: "OK, you've beaten me – now you're allowed to ask some questions."

There are so many possible approaches to the game it's hard to begin, but one of the most unusual aspects of *SFIV* is that Capcom

The stunning brushwork of the trailer led many to believe that the game would be stylised in a similar way. It was actually created by a team of animators outside Capcom and there are few similarities





things, we didn't have the technology to both show it onscreen and move it around. But finally we can do it, and this is a natural visual evolution for us."

The only characters shown thus far are Ryu and Ken, although a debug menu also lists options for Chun-Li, E Honda and Zangief, and when pressed Ono insists only that "it isn't finalised yet, but we're trying to use all of the characters from the SNES *Street Fighter II Turbo*, and we're obviously cooking up new characters as well."

Following the divisive decision to abandon *SFII* and *SFA*'s rosters in *SFIII*, this is most definitely giving the fans what they want to some degree, but it has to be said that several characters have been surpassed by their successors: to take but one example, Balrog seems a little useless after playing with *SFIII*'s comparable boxer, Dudley. We'll clearly have to wait and see on this one.

But Ryu and Ken have always been the core of the series, and the only characters to feature in every iteration. They were essentially interchangeable in the first game and the first version of *SFII*, and began to diverge from *Street Fighter II: Champion Edition* onwards, with Ryu becoming a defensive powerhouse with a stronger hurricane kick, while Ken's moves (in particular his upgraded dragon punch) were designed to dominate opponents with quick and brutal combinations. By the time of *Super Street Fighter II: The New Challengers*, Ryu had two fireballs (red and blue) while Ken had a dragon punch that



Ryu's new look lies somewhere between hyper-realism and cartoony exaggeration – particularly his extensive facial movement – but it is in the movement of his muscles while performing the classics (stages of the shoryuken are shown above) that the new look is most obviously a step forward



MAN VS MACHINE

One of *Street Fighter II*'s greatest cameos was the lonely automobile by the sea, just waiting to be pummelled into scrap for points in the bonus rounds. They've been scrapped in subsequent games, and reinstated in *SFIII*, but can we expect them in *SFIV*? "They'll be in there if I have to program them myself!" laughs Ono. "There is one problem – at the end of the '80s, those cars

would set opponents alight. In *SFIV* Ryu and Ken are significantly differentiated in motion: Ryu bobs up and down slowly, methodically, in a definite and regular rhythm; Ken on the other hand has a more hyperactive style of movement, bounces on the balls of his feet when standing still, and every few seconds flicks his thumb over his nose. Both characters retain the distinctions familiar from *SFIII*, the major difference being their brilliant transfer from 2D sprites into sinewy and chunky figures, allied to remarkable animation and facial expressions that reflect how well the fight's going (as well as, oddly, some extremely well defined buttocks). In terms of the stages, *SFIV* is also a graphical renaissance for the series, with a superb sense of perspective: Chun-Li's stage has streets stretching far off into the distance, full of colour, full of characters watching the fight from their plastic chairs while ticker-tape fans turn slowly, full of little incidental details.

There are some aspects that will be immediately familiar to any aficionado of the series, not least the controls, which are fundamentally unchanged from the previous iterations, from the three levels of attack power to pulling off throw manoeuvres when up close. They are fast, responsive, and with a real sense of connection in every blow. As expected, at the end of every match your performance is graded based on your technical proficiency, damage dealt and received, and use of special moves – as well as the usual points for a combination of vitality, time remaining and perfect performance. A combo meter is also in place and builds up during your attacks, and when you're being attacked a new 'revenge gauge' fills, both giving the player access to different but equally spectacular attacks at the right moment. Some of the super moves are familiar, such as Ken's Sho-Ryu-Reppa,

were all manufactured in Japan, and so that was a bit of a black joke from one Japanese company to another. But if we did that now, we'd get sued by Toyota! So we have to think carefully about what to do. You know, it would be crazy fun to just smash up a Ferrari, for instance, but... well, at Capcom we have a little of the rebel in us, so we'll come up with something."



Ryu's low punch is about to meet Ken's high kick, which in the best traditions of the series will come out better for the man from Japan. Ryu's headband and the lapels of his gi both move with their own properties in the wake of his flowing movements

but the possibilities now go beyond 'super' moves to 'ultra' moves – however, these depend on both a full combo and revenge meter, meaning that such assaults will only be possible in relatively even fights. Releasing an ultra combo triggers a camera movement towards the fighters and some dramatic angles as the blows are unleashed (presuming your opponent hasn't blocked), accompanied by flashes of bold primary colours in the background.

The fighting feels exactly like a *Street Fighter* game's should, with standoffs, jumps, fireballs, meaty sound effects at every connection, and the quick combinations that win matches. But to appreciate why *SFIV* is, in some respects, an evolution rather than a revolution for the series, an understanding of the greatness of *SFII*, and what it brought to the fighting genre, is essential both in terms of Ono's respect for the title, and his aims with *SFIV*. The innovations of *SFII* went far beyond the template laid out by its predecessor and other fighting games such as *Karate Champ*, and its genius as an arcade machine perhaps resided in being the first to encourage and reward the competition that underpinned high-score tables. This is most obvious in the idea that people paid to challenge – the winner of the fight was able to continue on the same credit, unless the loser paid for another round. The most important aspect of the game, however, was that for the first time players could choose between eight



characters, each with a distinct moveset, special attack and tactical approach. The longevity this gave the game is astonishing, evidenced by the fact that *SFII* is still a staple of tournaments such as EVO and is even now subject to periodic fine-tuning (as in the forthcoming XBLA update).

But if these factors were great design, an accidental innovation from *Street Fighter II* has done more than any other to influence the subsequent direction of fighting mechanics: combo attacks. Originally born of a programming glitch, a combo attack occurs when a move breaks the animation sequence of the previous move, and thus



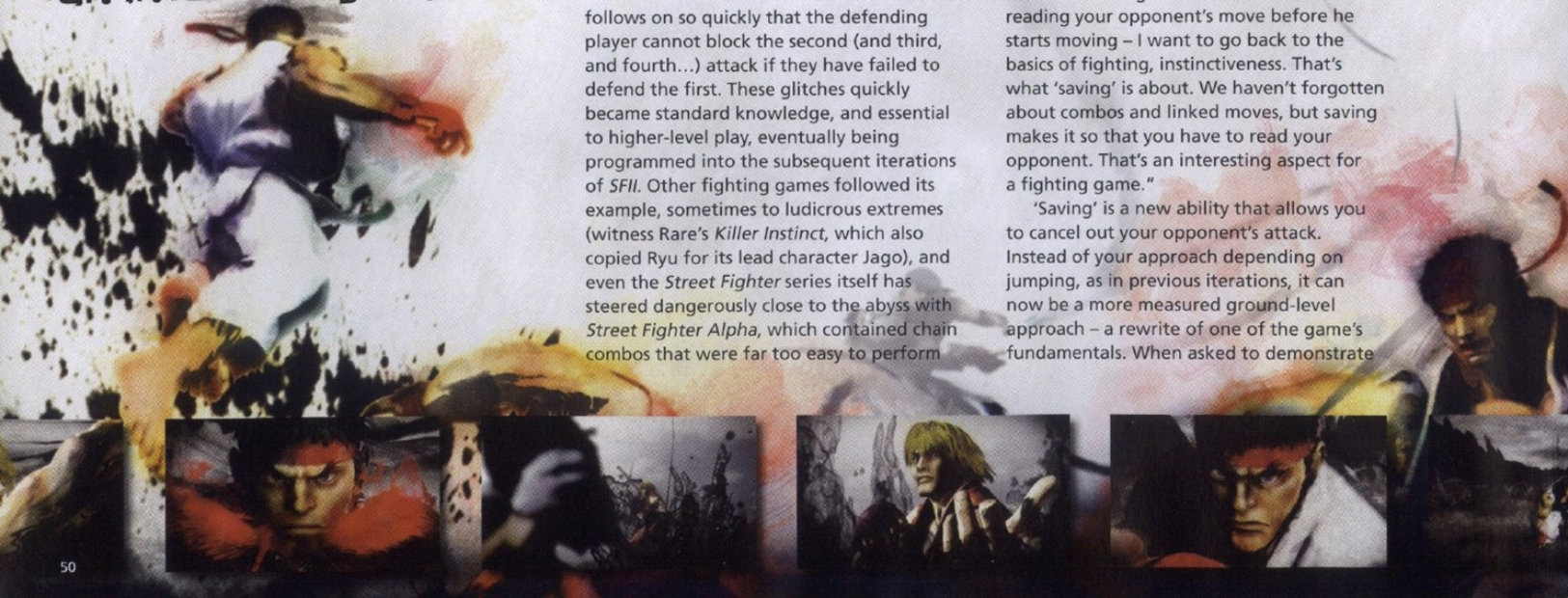
and a significant detriment to the game.

Ono points out that, since *SFII*'s happy accident of combos, "fighting games have come out that have exaggerated the importance of combos to the degree that, if you are able to launch a combo, you'll probably win. Combos became too important. That's not real fighting." That may be true, but where does the common ground between the real and the virtual lie? "Watch a boxing match: the skill is in reading your opponent's move before he starts moving – I want to go back to the basics of fighting, instinctiveness. That's what 'saving' is about. We haven't forgotten about combos and linked moves, but saving makes it so that you have to read your opponent. That's an interesting aspect for a fighting game."

'Saving' is a new ability that allows you to cancel out your opponent's attack. Instead of your approach depending on jumping, as in previous iterations, it can now be a more measured ground-level approach – a rewrite of one of the game's fundamentals. When asked to demonstrate

"You have to read your opponent. That's an interesting aspect for a fighting game"

follows on so quickly that the defending player cannot block the second (and third, and fourth...) attack if they have failed to defend the first. These glitches quickly became standard knowledge, and essential to higher-level play, eventually being programmed into the subsequent iterations of *SFII*. Other fighting games followed its example, sometimes to ludicrous extremes (witness Rare's *Killer Instinct*, which also copied Ryu for its lead character Jago), and even the *Street Fighter* series itself has steered dangerously close to the abyss with *Street Fighter Alpha*, which contained chain combos that were far too easy to perform



THE FINAL CUT

Released in 1990, *Street Fighter 2010: The Final Fight* is probably something Capcom wished we'd forget: set 23 years after original, Ken is now a scientist and has discovered Cyboplasm, a formula that gives men superhuman strength. Sure enough, it's stolen, and Ken has to chase it down in a game that bore more resemblances to *Strider* than *Street Fighter*. It's not alien in the

context of the times, where games like *Bionic Commando* would be remade for home conversions, but it has no real place in the *Street Fighter* canon. An interesting sidestreet to this is that *Final Fight*'s working title was *Street Fighter '89*, and by the time of the *Street Fighter Alpha* series several of the scrolling title's characters had found their way into the *SF* roster.



this in practice, Ono puts down the joystick and begins squaring up to an old cardboard cutout of Capcom's *Chaos Legion*, before moving in deliberately to punch it: the inspiration behind saving is the moment when fighters square up and look for an opening. "You have about two and a half seconds when saving to decide what your opponent's going to do," says Ono.

More crucially, however, saving will allow *SFIV* to move away from the jump/counter and fireball dynamic that dominates movement in the previous iterations. In practice it is triggered by combining strong punch and light punch, cancels a previously triggered move, can be charged, and offers a temporary period of invulnerability to the player. "Basically, until now in a *Street Fighter* game to approach someone involved jumping," explains Ono, "but the saving system allows you to negate your opponent's attack and move closer. While you're saving you're invincible and can move towards your opponent, and then go on the offensive." Capcom claims that the game is still in early development, and saving

could yet be removed if it's found to unbalance the core fighting, but the inspiration behind it is to change the dynamic of play completely. Ono: "In *SFIII*, parrying and guarding is very much about waiting for opponents to attack. But in *SFIV* we wanted to create a more aggressive and attacking mode, and that's why saving is in – to cancel out repetitive attacks from your opponent and let you strike back."

So *SFIV* is not only about learning moves, but learning your opponents and facing them down. "Ha!" laughs Ono. "It's also all about hitting things!" Beyond that admirable summation, the technicalities and the influence of its predecessors, what is the fundamental concept behind *SFIV* as a game? "First of all, the most important thing about *SFIV* is 'fair rules', and by that I mean fair and clear rules that can be understood by everyone easily." A lesson learned from the birth of modern videogaming: "Avoid missing ball for high score". "Another element is that if you practise, you get better, so people don't get stressed out," continues Ono. "From the creative point of view, it's kind of easier to make a game that allows you to win, but it's very difficult to make a game that would give you a reason for losing, and make you want to challenge it again."

"When I think about *Street Fighter*, I think there are two things to balance. One is the characteristics of fighting and competition; the other is considering what the game is – a tool to have fun. A tool to give the players a virtual fighting stage – an imaginary arena, if you like." It's this emphasis on *Street Fighter* as a functional tool for players, above all else, that informs Ono's vision for the changes to the philosophy of the series, slight though they may seem. "We want this game to work for a very wide audience, so that although the best players might win,



Beginning as the same sprites in different colours, Ken and Ryu has always been the classic *Street Fighter* match-up, and the game's various iterations have introduced subtle distinctions. In *SFIV*, Ken's style seems to suit a more aggressive approach, with some kicks causing brutal levels of damage



people will always be able to get a kick in."

One need only look at Capcom's US website and the excellent running commentary on rebalancing *Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix* by Dan Sirlin (an *SF* veteran of many years) to realise how treacherous these waters are. Making the game more accessible is not simply a question of balancing the characters in a rock-paper-scissors style. "Some of it is to do with balance," says Ono, "but there are more obvious things we're doing like the revenge gauge – if you're taking a lot of hits then the revenge meter will fill up quickly and let you strike back powerfully. That gives a chance for beginners to hurt someone that's more skilful."

are making a conscious effort to find a balance, yes, but my context is that I insist on thinking about this game as a tool to have fun, to enjoy. The fun of strategy is quite distinct from whether you win or lose – arranging your soldiers where you want, and working out tactics. I want to incorporate that element in this game – almost at a level where it doesn't matter whether you win or lose, it's all about enjoying it."

Part of this may be abandoning the fighting variants that have, in past games, ultimately forced players into default choices. The most obvious example of this is *SF Alpha 3*, where characters were offered the choice of A-ism, X-ism or V-ism styles –



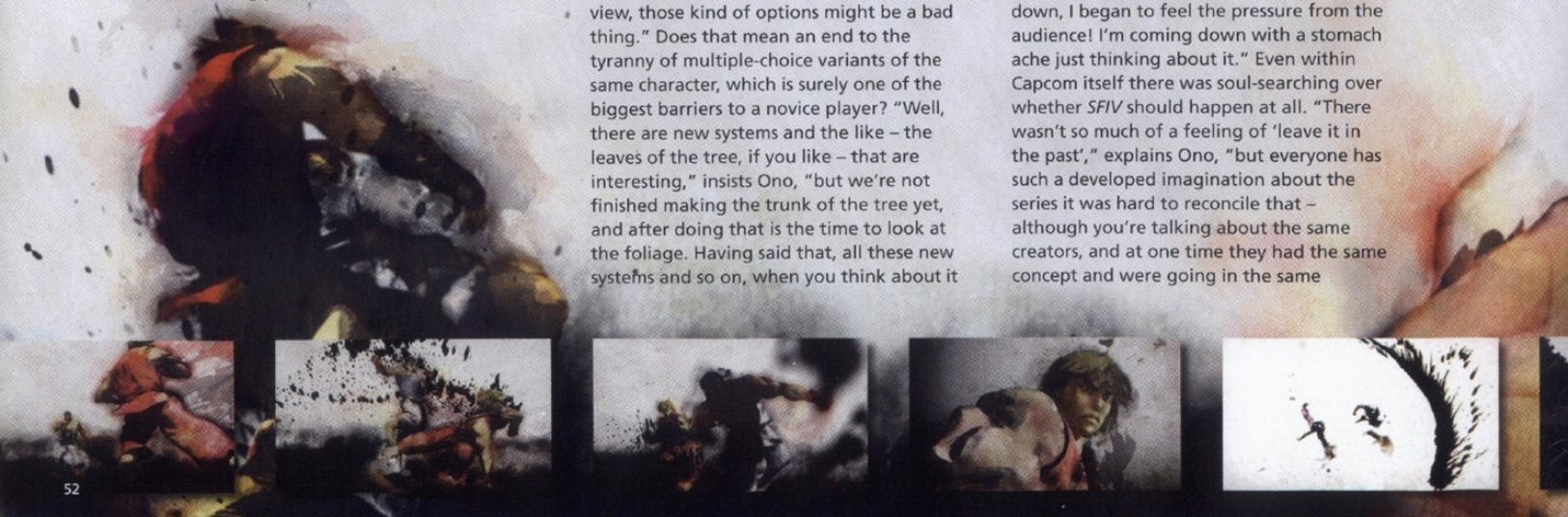
they're all going back to *SFII*. I just want to make solid gameplay first, and then think about systems and the like, but the core experience is what's important."

SFIV's platform hasn't yet been decided, but it seems certain to be on arcade, 360 and PS3, although "at the minute it could be DS!" insists Ono. Unsurprisingly, there's no projected release date: "It's the 20th anniversary next year, although strictly speaking it'll be the 21st anniversary – somehow we miscalculated, and have already done the 15th anniversary wrong – and I don't know if we'll make that," says Ono. He seems briefly free of the expectations for the title when showing off the game and the intricate graphical touches, but these more prosaic enquiries lead him onto the context for the game. "Up until we announced it I've felt a lot of pressure from inside Capcom – but then when the trailer went live and we got such a phenomenal reaction and our server went down, I began to feel the pressure from the audience! I'm coming down with a stomach ache just thinking about it." Even within Capcom itself there was soul-searching over whether *SFIV* should happen at all. "There wasn't so much of a feeling of 'leave it in the past'," explains Ono, "but everyone has such a developed imagination about the series it was hard to reconcile that – although you're talking about the same creators, and at one time they had the same concept and were going in the same


"When the trailer went live and our server went down, I began to feel the pressure!"

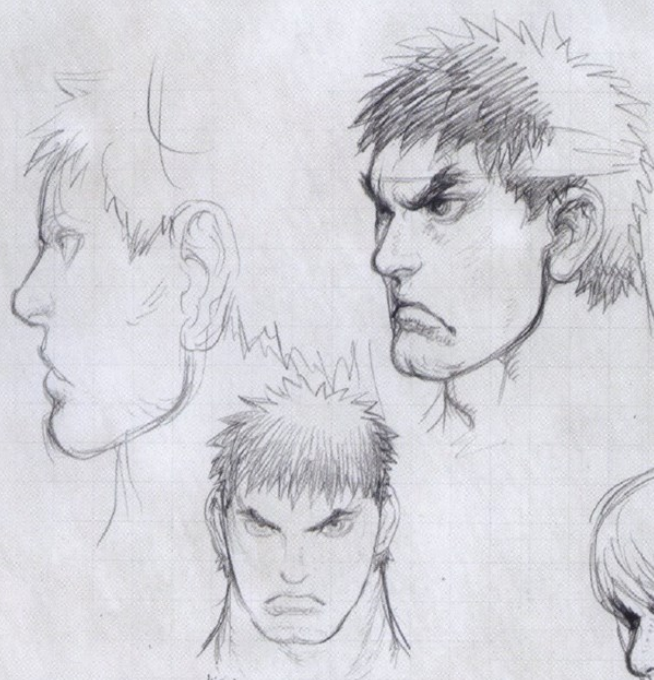
But a game where the amateur has a chance against the professional, and the beginner can inflict damage on the expert, might be considered anathema to *Street Fighter*. It's worth thinking about whether 'balance' is even the appropriate concept in this context, given that *SFIII* is among the finest and most balanced 2D fighters yet made, and yet is widely agreed to be the preserve of the dedicated player. "This is an interesting problem," admits Ono. "We

but V-ism ultimately offered a competitive advantage and relegated the other two styles to mere curios. In *SFIII*, meanwhile, players had to choose their super attack before each match. Ono is sympathetic to the point, but insists that, with regard to *SFIV*, nothing is yet concrete: "I just haven't decided yet – as a player I always like being able to fiddle, but as a producer I understand that a wide audience has to enjoy the game. From a fighting point of view, those kind of options might be a bad thing." Does that mean an end to the tyranny of multiple-choice variants of the same character, which is surely one of the biggest barriers to a novice player? "Well, there are new systems and the like – the leaves of the tree, if you like – that are interesting," insists Ono, "but we're not finished making the trunk of the tree yet, and after doing that is the time to look at the foliage. Having said that, all these new systems and so on, when you think about it



direction. Everyone has almost an emotional investment in an imagined *Street Fighter* – it should be this or that, it should look that way, etc. There were a lot of discussions – a lot of discussions – and at the end of the day we had to give up and say we just don't know where to start, but we have to do it. That was the majority of opinion within Capcom, while a minority thought we shouldn't do it."

Impossible expectations are surely the most worrying aspect for the team, and something quite different from development on even a 'normal' high-profile title. "OK, one thing I'm worried about is that within these eight to ten years [since *SFIII*] I've been talking to people who were waiting for this revival, and imaginations have got so big that the common ground is smaller – but these years mean everyone's *Street Fighter* has become different, become a huge monster, if you like." Everyone has their own expectations for *SFIV*, and it will be impossible to please all of the people all of the time. "Exactly. I'm a little bit afraid that everyone has their own idea about what the game should be, but" – and with a little twinkle in the eye – "at the same time I'm thrilled to be working on it for those reasons. If people want to criticise it then that's fine, because I will try to rise above it and beat them." Amid the caveats and comparisons that new games are smothered in, that stands out as a prime example of something almost uniquely Capcom and *Street Fighter*: it's fighting talk. 



These are the first concept sketches for the reimaginings of Ryu and Ken, particularly important in the context of the new emphasis on faces in the game, whereby the fighters will look at each other and react as they trade blows. As always, Ken needs a haircut. In the bottom centre, another figure has crept in – in all likelihood the first glimpse of *SFIV*'s incarnation of Chun-Li



THE RYO THING

While Capcom could be accused of recycling the basic Ryu model a few times, at least it was the company's to do so: by the time of *Street Fighter Alpha* the character Dan Hibiki (which translates as 'echo') had been created to poke fun at the multitude of copies of Ryu that had appeared in other companies' games, primarily SNK's *Art Of Fighting* which featured 'Ryo' Sakazaki. Dan's

moves resemble Ryo's, with a weak fireball, dragon punch and hurricane kick, and even their outfits and stated ambitions are similar. Official acknowledgement of the gag came with the Neo-Geo Pocket game *SNK Vs Capcom: Match Of The Millennium*, in which choosing Dan and Ryo as tag partners results in the unique team name of 'The Big Bros'.





REZZED UP

Tetsuya Mizuguchi goes high-def and multimedia as he continues his travels into digital expression

It's not easy to imagine many videogame designers working with Al Gore, but **Tetsuya Mizuguchi**, *Rez* creator and chief creative officer of Q Entertainment, is one. With a history of overtly melding games with influences from other creative areas, most notably music and graphic arts with *Lumines* and *Rez*, and recent forays into music production with the 'virtual' band Genki Rockets, Mizuguchi is distinctive for looking outwards in an industry that tends toward introversion.

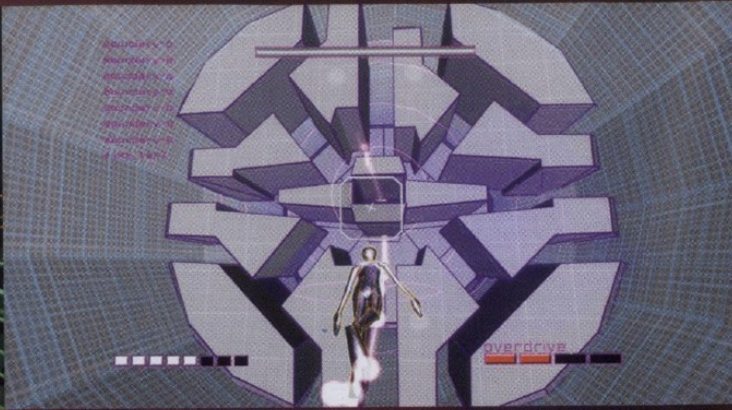
It therefore made a lot of sense when it was revealed he was behind the first performance at the Tokyo Live Earth concert in July. With a video and light show, Genki Rockets played the songs *Heavenly Star* and *Breeze*, and introduced a video of a 'holographic' Gore outlining the concert's theme, all designed and directed by Mizuguchi.

Live Earth's enormous reach – a 10,000-strong audience at the event and many more millions around the world watching online – was extremely significant to him, because only a year

ago Genki Rockets were unknown. "The most exciting aspect of this internet broadcast was its HD format," he explains. "When we started our show, someone called me on my mobile phone. It was a friend from the US who was excited to see the event starting on his computer in high resolution. Before, we did not have the means of distributing our audio and video creations like we can do today. The media to do so have changed in an incredible way, and our success with Genki certainly comes with YouTube success and the popularity of iTunes. I believe we came at the right time, in total sync with this new digital environment and culture."

For him, the things he's learned working with Genki Rockets over the last year – the new technologies and production methods – have direct relevance for his work on videogames, not least for the use of *Heavenly Star* (and its video, which he directed) in *Lumines II* and *Live*. "I'm convinced such changes will happen in the interactive world as well," he says.

TITLE: REZ HD
FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER: Q ENTERTAINMENT
ORIGIN: JAPAN
RELEASE: Q1 2008

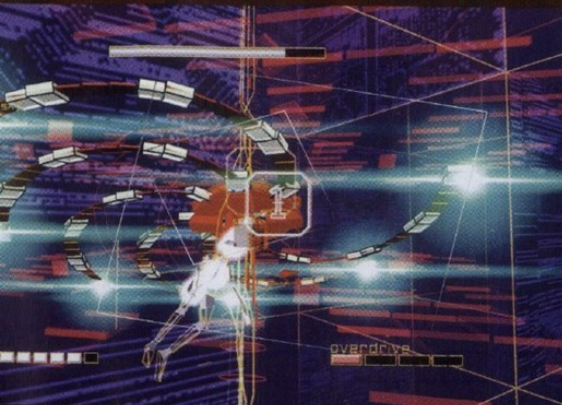


"Some would argue this is no interactive experience while others would say the opposite, but I don't really care about that. I'm more concerned about people feeling emotions thanks to my creations, about what message I can include and how it can be welcomed."

And, indeed, in that period he hardly turned away from games. "Both are running in parallel, but I feel like Genki Rockets bring more volume to my creativity. You meet new people – I'm not sure that meeting with Al Gore will have any impact on my gaming creativity, but during that event I was able to meet various musicians and visual creators. I had access to a full range of new technologies, and looking at my teams working on the visual aspect of Genki Rockets is also a huge source of inspiration."

But it's fair to say that Mizuguchi has not exactly concentrated on creating new properties. His titles for Xbox Live Arcade over the last couple of years, *Every Extend Extra Extreme* and *Lumines Live*, are updates to their PSP originals. And there's the upcoming *Rez HD*, again for Xbox Live Arcade, a faithful remake of his classic on-rails music-based shooter for Sega. "This IP is five to six years old, but I asked [Sega] that if a new version of the game was to be made whether it would be possible for me to do it," he explains. "Sega was very open, and while the project would be under Sega's copyright, I was licensed. I'm really thankful toward Sega. They clearly understood the value of the experience in realising that I was certainly the only one capable of working on such a project." Mizuguchi thinks that such a decision was the result of the increasing stature of designers like himself: "In the past, it was all focused on the game and the creator's name would not come out very often. The concept of creation was not really common, but changes were inevitable. The gaming industry has 15 to 20 years of experience, and in





The sharp lines and planes of colour of *Rez HD* (far left) demonstrate just how well executed the original's visual design was. With the more recent *Every Extend Extra* (the XBLA Extreme version pictured near left) and *Lumines Live* (below, featuring Genki Rockets' virtual frontwoman, Lumi), Mizuguchi has sustained his fascination with the relationship between music and game design

comparison, the movie industry has more than a hundred. I think we are experiencing the equivalent to the early age of the movie industry."

The success of games like *Lumines* must have helped his cause, having made a new subgenre – music-based puzzle games – popular. But he had a battle at first just trying to sell the idea. "You know, the first time I went to see the publishers with this game, most of them told me that there is no market for music games, that there is no market for puzzle games, that it was too bad," he says, explaining that he believes that *Lumines'* popularity has led to a better general understanding of his older games, like *Rez*. "I think they show the potential of a video-audio gaming experience, or at least that music can be a viable form of gaming," he continues. "Then come titles like *Rock Band* – it is now not only a trend but part of culture. In the past, when I made *Space Channel 5* and *Rez*, I had my share of disappointments, but now I realise that by keeping on pushing the concept there was something good at the end."

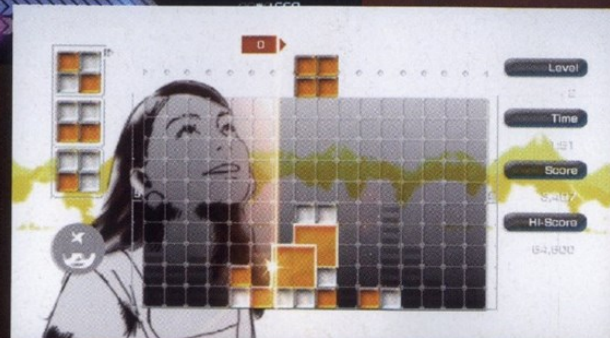
Rez HD is almost exactly the same game as the Dreamcast version and its subsequent PS2 port, but Mizuguchi is quick to clarify that its addition of widescreen and high definition are significant. "You have to see this version as the true vision I had for

this game, the pure *Rez* experience I always wanted to deliver. The graphics are finally pure. Where a line was made almost of points before, it is traced like a laser this time. You can now appreciate the detail of each texture. You also can hear clearly all the sounds." Mizuguchi goes as far as to claim that the new technology has transformed the play experience. "This is a new type of chemistry," he says. "This was my idea and it is now reality. I'm playing it every day, not to check the progress but because it really provides me with some very cool and pleasant emotions. I think this is the only game in all the ones I made so far which creates such feelings in me."

So, technology is at last in phase with his initial vision, and he says that working with it has lead him to think of new concepts. Might this lead to a possible *Rez 2* with Sega? "I don't know if such a project will be named *Rez 2*," he replies. "But should such an opportunity appear, I would be more than happy to do it."

Speaking of remakes, at Sega's booth at TGS in September was the new *Sega Rally*, developed by the UK-based Sega Racing Studio. As an update to the series that Mizuguchi originally designed, we wonder whether he has any particular feelings about it, but he says not. "We created *Sega Rally* and its arcade sequel within harsh technical limits, especially in terms of graphics. So we had to work on what is not apparent onscreen to make the game successful. I think we delivered not a simple racing game but an experience that provides a very good feeling. Now, conditions are different and you can do more. I'm not opposed at all to have those games in others' hands. In fact, I like to see what others can or will do. I like to see other people's views. You can learn a lot this way."

Mizuguchi is similarly progressive about gaming innovations such as online delivery, by which his latest games for 360 are distributed, and a

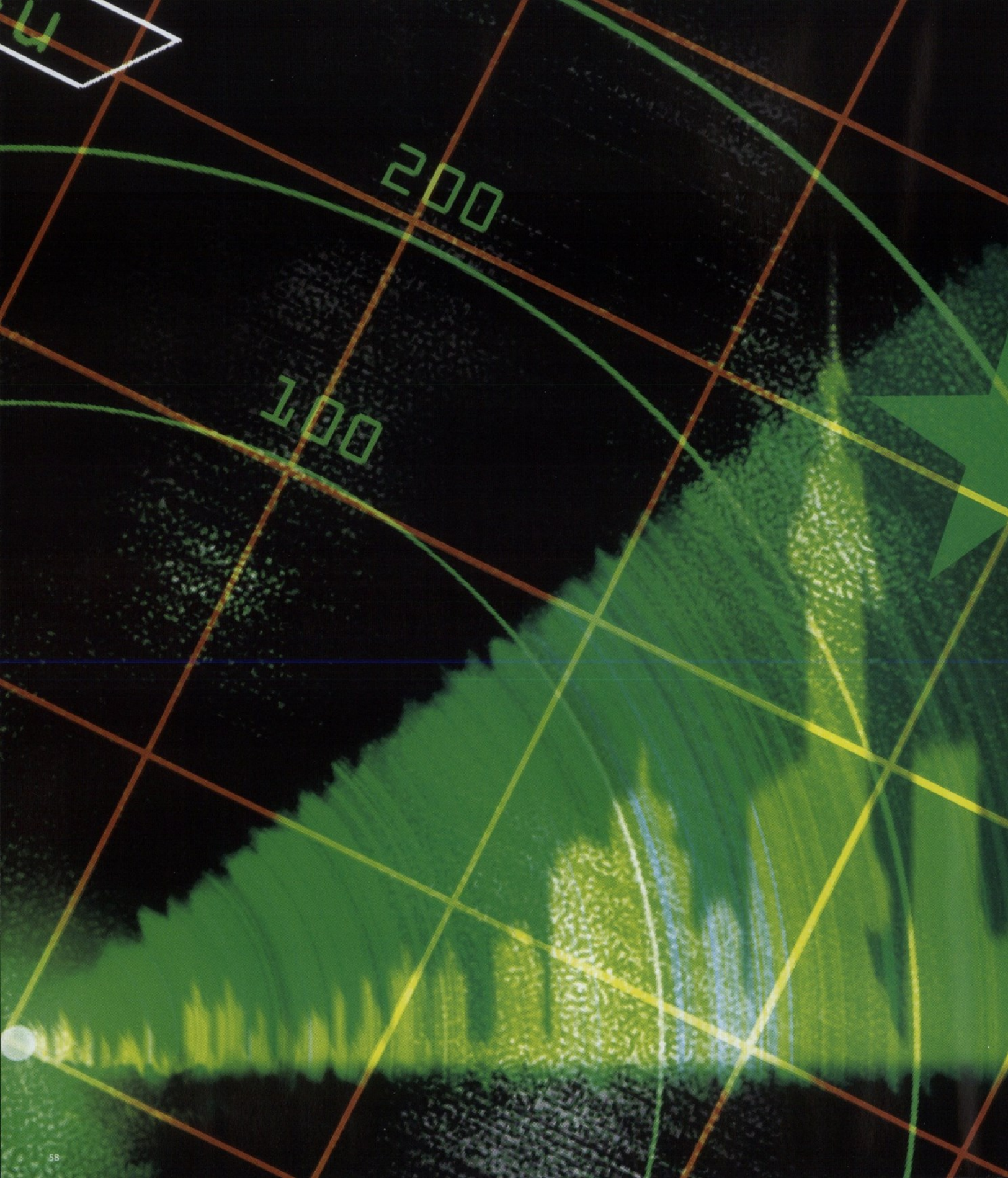


stance surely influenced by his experiences with Genki Rockets on YouTube. "You now have the possibility to create your content and deliver it as it is and much faster. I see the future in online delivery," he says, saying that it will lead to even greater changes. "The type of content will change, and with people online they are not just downloading but also sharing, leading to changes in the way you play, and I know there are many issues about microtransactions but I see this as an early obstacle, and the personalisation of content, of experience, should become standard."

"The HD version of *Rez* is the true vision I had for the game, the pure experience I always wanted to deliver"

And for him, the increased storage capacity available to our gaming platforms, even that found on the likes of mobile phones, further enforces his notion that content is king. The spectrum of formats on which *Lumines* has been released – home console, handheld and mobile – suggests that agility is now the key to producing games, and the breadth of Mizuguchi's creative activity and his keenness to bring new influences into games design ensures that he is well placed to take advantage of this seismic shift. With a career lasting over 17 years, and still going strong, Mizuguchi remains one of videogaming's most dynamic auteurs.





SHANGHAI RISING

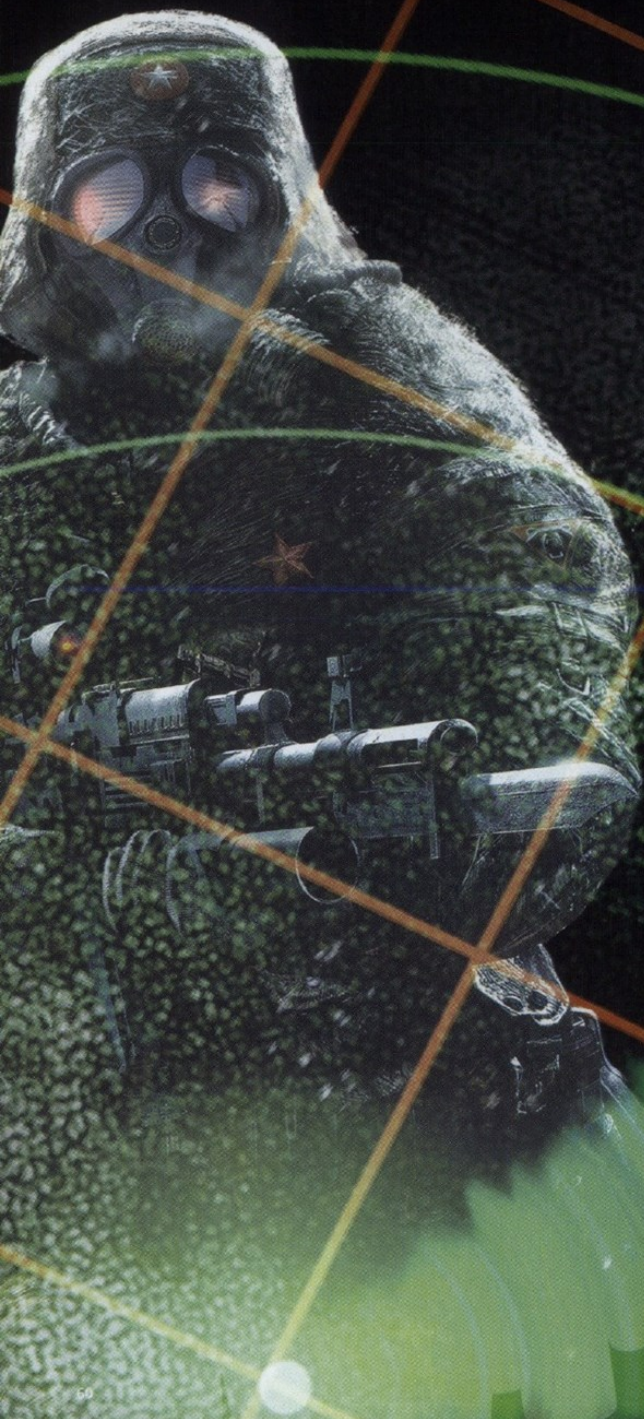
ONCE SEEN AS A SOURCE OF CHEAP LABOUR, CHINA IS NOW A BLOSSOMING CONSUMER MARKET AND WELLSPRING OF TALENT. UBISOFT SHANGHAI IS THE STUDIO AT THE FOREFRONT OF THIS BOOM

Ten years is a lot of change," says **Corinne Le Roy**, Ubisoft Shanghai's managing director. She goes to the window of the small 14th-floor conference room. "If you looked out here ten years ago, I don't think you would have seen any buildings at all. Nothing was finished, and you had dust almost everywhere. The only big building you had in Shanghai was the Oriental Pearl Tower – the TV tower. You could go in and see all the buildings around it starting construction, and then go two weeks later and really see the buildings growing, growing, growing..."

From the near-central point of the Oriental Pearl Tower, a building enfolded by the undulations of the Yangtze, the river which bisects the city, Shanghai appears as a tightly packed forest of high-rise buildings, supertall skyscrapers and scaffolding. It's not far from the metropolis envisioned by dystopian sci-fi – a vision of steel, glass and neon stretching outwards and upwards, its limits obscured by the intense smog coughed up from congested roads. China is a state undergoing profound change, and Shanghai is the poster child for its avidly commercial direction and rapid development, weathering the economic and social disasters conjured by the Cultural Revolution to vie with Hong Kong as the republic's economic centre.

"Ten years ago people were already starting to talk about China as a growing country," says Le Roy when we ask about Ubisoft's prescience in founding a studio here. "At that time Germany was the number three PC market in the world, and everybody was saying it'd be overtaken by China in the coming years, so the Ubisoft CEO asked me if I'd go to China to see what we could do. Our goal was to be the first to distribute a game in Chinese, but when we saw that the universities here were training a lot of people we asked, why not start a development studio? So, step by step, we began recruiting artists and doing a few localisations and outsourcing jobs – for six months – giving us

This vertiginous view of the Oriental Pearl Tower should be familiar to players of the studio's *Splinter Cell: Double Agent*



the time to train people. We started porting the main Ubisoft licences, and then we were taking care of sequels. Now we are creating games – *EndWar* is the first creation of the studio.”

The importance of this project to those working at Shanghai is transparent: *EndWar* represents a new era of creative freedom for the studio. After ten years of handling ports and creating alternate *Splinter Cell* sequels, Shanghai has now been entrusted with taking the Tom Clancy licence in a direction that Ubisoft has never before investigated: realtime

studio is Chinese, in building up the studio's competency in the RTS genre, Ubisoft has pulled talent from across the globe. Just as with its rapid growth and sky-high ambition, Ubisoft Shanghai's unusually polyglot workplace mirrors the cosmopolitanism of the city itself.

“China's become the centre of international business, and Shanghai in particular,” says the Australian-born De Plater. “I'm sure other places in China feel very different, but Shanghai's a very international city – there's a huge population of ex-pats here from around the

“SHANGHAI'S A VERY INTERNATIONAL CITY – THERE'S A HUGE POPULATION OF EX-PATS FROM AROUND THE WORLD”

strategy. Even more ambitiously, it's a console RTS – a combination that has often proved in the past to be an awkward marriage. If successful, *EndWar* will establish the studio as a development house capable of seeing through the creation of an original franchise in its totality, opening the door for the origination of its own properties and allowing the company to segue into the Chinese market. It's quite a responsibility, and clearly one that has not been taken lightly: Ubisoft Shanghai has attracted the good and the great of the RTS world, building a team of almost unrivalled expertise in the genre.

“The brief for the game came right from the top of Ubisoft,” explains the studio's creative director, **Michael De Plater**, himself a veteran of strategy gaming having worked on many of Creative Assembly's *Total War* series. “They wanted a Tom Clancy online console RTS. That decision having been made, this was the studio at which to make it. You know, Ubisoft Montreal has these huge flagship games like *Splinter Cell*, *Prince Of Persia* and *Assassin's Creed*. So they are one of the best in the world at thirdperson adventures and stealth – if Ubisoft Shanghai can be the best in the world at console strategy, then that's going to open up opportunities to make other games in that genre as well. That's what I'd like to see.”

Whilst the vast majority of the Shanghai

world. The community of westerners here is bigger than Brighton's – there are more French restaurants, Mexican restaurants and Spanish restaurants and tapas bars here than there are in England. We've got at least ten nationalities on the *EndWar* team. We have an engineer from Serbia, we have testers from Romania, one of our AI engineers is from Australia, our story-writer is from America – it's really international. One of the good things about Ubisoft is you get people on missions from one of the other international studios. The company can move experts around like that.”



EndWar keeps the number of unit types fairly small, but gives you the opportunity to customise them to the point where they function in a considerably different manner, creating complexity and depth without making the game intimidating to pick up and play



While China, and the east in general, has seen an influx of hi-tech businesses for many years, the videogame industry has been slow to follow this trend. "China has been an open country for only a few years now," says Le Roy. "The first stage of western interest in China was the manufacturing industry; it's come to IT but from a hardware perspective. From a software side with the content and creativity you need a more versatile team, and it was more difficult in China because the people here had little experience of videogames. When I arrived ten years ago, you had no studios and people had no idea about consoles. It takes time to build and it requires investment, putting money there to train people. It's still early."

That's not to say that western developers haven't been making use of eastern talent – outsourcing aspects of game design to China is now commonplace, and it's an area that is growing with some speed. Le Roy suggests that 300 companies have opened in Shanghai within the last three years to handle some aspect of development work for companies in the west. Activision, 2K Games, EA, Epic Games and Konami all have a presence in China. "But," Le Roy says, "Ubisoft is the only one producing games from A to Z. We are betting on China not only as an outsourcing market but as a platform for the entire process of game creation."

The west is now familiar with the gradual exodus of industry to labour-cheap economies,

and it's easy to assume that the Shanghai studio was founded solely as a cost-cutting venture by Ubisoft. Certainly it is one benefit – Le Roy suggests that Ubisoft's global production costs are 20 per cent lower than its competitors as a result of its interests in countries like China and Romania.

"That's good to know for my next salary negotiation," says **Julian Gerighty**, a rising star within Ubisoft whose diverse responsibilities are insufficiently described by the ambiguous title of editorial content director. Yet the picture he paints of developing in Shanghai suggests that the financial benefits are not as clear-cut as they first appear. "One thing we've seen in Shanghai in the last five years is that the salaries have risen because of the competition. There are Chinese companies trying to recruit people from Ubisoft. If you have a good engineer then he's interesting to game developers and business developers – he's interesting to everybody. Artists: same thing."

"Of course the salary cost is far lower in China than in other countries," says Le Roy, "but it doesn't mean we enter into a policy of paying less to reduce the cost. To set up a studio like this we need to compensate people at the right level so that they are willing to give their best."

In fact, perhaps surprisingly, Ubisoft's costs in China are similar to those at the Montreal studio. "Ubisoft has special advantages with being in Montreal, and this is probably one of the reasons that the studio there is already three times larger than the studio in China," Le Roy explains. "The Canadian government did a lot to stimulate the industry and to attract publishers and developers from the US and Europe to establish branches in Canada. We don't have the same advantages from the Chinese government."

And yet here they are. As we talk longer, a clearer idea of the incentives for development in China emerges, and it is one that should be more worrying to the west than were it simply a case of Chinese workers undercutting western labour. Ubisoft has not come to China because the talent is cheaper – it's simply where there is more talent.

"Having a studio in Shanghai allows us to expand the pool of talent that we can take

COMPREHENSIVE COMPREHENSION

With such an international team, you'd think that communication might be something of a problem, but you'd be surprised, De Plater says. "One of the differences with working in the UK is that everyone's highly educated. There's less vernacular or slang – so you tend to actually often be more precise in how you communicate. In England and America, people are so comfortable with the shorthand of how they speak that people make assumptions about what someone else has understood about what you've said. Here, because people are much more careful about how things are understood, you communicate more in other ways: illustration, drawing charts, whatever. I think communication here is often less ambiguous – which on a project of this scale is really helpful."



"EndWar is the first step towards originating our own IPs," says Gerighty. "The Tom Clancy licence gives us a lot of advantages and a great creative framework, but when you look at the actual gameplay ideas within EndWar it could stand on its own without the licence"



TITLE: TOM CLANCY'S ENDWAR
FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: UBISOFT SHANGHAI
ORIGIN: CHINA
RELEASE: TBC

from," says Gerighty. "In North America, specifically, anybody who is trained and wants a job in videogames can find one. There's now more of a shortage of talent there than anything else. And in terms of class, I've been super-impressed with the talent in China. That's why there's so much outsourcing here, for sure – the engineers are world class. So western companies are looking at China, not because of cost advantages necessarily; you're looking to expand the number of people who can work on your games. On *EndWar* we've had four years of development with 200 people; we are getting bigger and bigger games."

"And people want to produce multiplatform games simultaneously," continues Le Roy. "You need close to 350 people – whose studio can do it? We need to have multiple studios across the world in places where we can grow the size of the studio faster. Because year after year of

passionate console gamers – it's still a fairly rare breed in China. There aren't that many people who have had the money to invest in a console and find the games, or even to chip their consoles to play the pirated games. So creatively I still think that to match the audience we're aiming for it's one of the areas we've had the most training to do."

Le Roy agrees: "You don't become creative director after your first game – you need to do plenty of games before you reach that. We still need to do three or four more games before our Chinese designers are able to lead the direction of the game."

Inevitably, of course, as Ubisoft Shanghai expands more Chinese will find themselves in roles of creative responsibility – well preparing the company for when it turns to the Chinese market. Indeed, while the Tom Clancy licence would seem to place *EndWar* within a distinctly

"I'VE BEEN SUPER-IMPRESSED WITH THE TALENT IN CHINA. THAT'S WHY THERE'S SO MUCH OUTSOURCING HERE"

production requires more people to get involved, and in order to support the growth of Ubisoft we need to produce two additional franchises every three years."

Despite its incorporation of local talent, Ubisoft Shanghai currently remains a western-led company, producing games for the western market. Though 90 per cent of its workforce is Chinese, the lead developers we meet are mostly immigrants of various other nationalities.

"In terms of creative design, there are certain things that are very popular in China that are very different from western console games," says Gerighty, "so there's a whole training and integration process with Ubisoft's way of developing. We need creative leaders who have worked on several games and are super-

American oeuvre, the game actually represents a marrying of eastern and western interests. Walking across the studio floor at lunchtime, the number of screens flickering with the battlefields of *Company Of Heroes* and *WarCraft 3* make it quite apparent that the RTS is a popular genre.

"When I started getting to know the guys here, we played *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War* and some other RTS games and I just got annihilated," says De Plater. "It was just embarrassing. The Chinese here aren't just gamers, they are hardcore RTS gamers."

It may be a surprising fact for a country only just shaking off its Cold War 'second world' status, but gaming has become a hugely popular pursuit in China. Just as Ubisoft predicted a decade ago, the PC has rapidly proliferated,

although the largely piracy-based market remains a difficult one to broach using western sales models.

"Plenty of consumers are playing games in China," says Le Roy. "You can go to a village 200km from Shanghai – one that looks like a medieval village – you can't even understand how they have ADSL there. And yet you'll go into a room and there'll be 20 PCs and everyone will be playing MMOGs. It's unbelievable. You know, the Chinese are gamblers, they are gamers, but the purchase power of people is very low. The only way to sell a game in China and get an investment back from the market is to give the game away for free and sell avatars and items."

Piracy isn't the only hurdle that Ubisoft faces as it turns its attention to Chinese gamers,



We ask how a predominantly Chinese team feel about making a game directed at a western cultural milieu. "I think Tom Clancy the writer might not be aimed at the Chinese," says De Plater, "but *EndWar* the game absolutely is. The principles of strategy gaming are so universal"



Have the politics of Tom Clancy ever asked Chinese officials? "I've never noticed any interference day to day," says De Plater. "We wouldn't do something where we had China as the bad guy, but that wasn't what we wanted to do anyway."

however. It is one thing to get a licence to produce games, says Le Roy, but it starts to get much more complex when you want to sell your game on the Chinese market.

"The Chinese authorities are willing to protect the local distribution companies for two reasons: firstly, mastery of the business, and secondly, mastery of the content and censorship. They think that Chinese companies will be more appropriate with their content for the Chinese market. Today if we want to launch an MMOG in China and operate it ourselves we have to work with a Chinese company as we don't have the appropriate licence. We need to keep lobbying, but it isn't easy. We are a publishing company, and publishing in China means content, and content means protectionism. We didn't have any problems developing *Double*

Agent over here, but we got in trouble when we wanted to sell a PC version of *Double Agent* in China. It will help a lot if the content we promote is Chinese, and promotes the Chinese culture here and in the west."

To this end, the Shanghai studio is working on a couple of projects that will appeal directly to the Chinese market, although Le Roy and Gerighty are careful not to do much more than drop hints as to what these might be.

"Ubisoft Shanghai has learnt how to make games," says Gerighty. "We've done ports and sequels – I think the next step is to think about creating our own franchises which look at the Chinese market. I think it makes absolute sense. People here are excited to work on RTS because it's a genre that the local population know and love. It's something that Shanghai studio has



SHANGHAI RISING



Ubisoft Shanghai takes up two floors of this skyscraper in an area which is being speedily consumed by the city's desire for growth. Helming the studio's huge workforce: creative director Michael De Plater and MD Corinne Le Roy

earned the right to after *EndWar*. At the moment we just finished two projects, so we have two teams that are more or less either on holiday or involved in the conception process. One of these projects we are really excited about – the whole studio is passionate about it because it's turn-based strategy – something Ubisoft has never attempted before."

"I think this game will suit the Chinese market quite well," says Le Roy. "It will work on the rebirth of a franchise that is one of the best-selling in China. And I will give you another tip," she adds before Gerighty can intervene. "This game will be on console – that is one of our mandates."

"And we'll stop right there," says Gerighty.

Regardless of the success of *EndWar*, it's clear that Ubisoft Shanghai is a powerhouse of talent, the growth of which augurs fundamental changes for the industry as a whole. Not only does it forecast the increasing migration of creative industries to China, but it also marks the importance of that nation as consumers of videogames. As with Shanghai in general, there is a strong sense of optimism at the studio, a genuine hunger for success, and it's difficult not to be buoyed along by it. For some time, the east has been predicted as the inheritor and successor of the west, and the fervent buzz of Ubisoft's Shanghai studio not only corroborates this, it suggests that it may well be deserved.

STRATEGY AT THE SPEED OF SOUND

During our visit, we were able to sit down with apocalyptic military RTS *EndWar* and play a little of both the singleplayer and multiplayer. Avoiding a control interface that would prove cumbersome on consoles, *EndWar*'s primary innovation – the use of your voice to direct your troops – was inevitably the subject of some scrutiny considering its dubious past implementations. Delightfully, the game interpreted nearly all of our commands and, after some practice, the fluidity of the system became apparent.

EndWar fixes your viewpoint above a selected unit, rather than allowing it to roam. It's a little frustrating at first, being accustomed to investigating the lay of the land freely – but this is somewhat mitigated by a separate tactical map (from which the entire game can be controlled) and the fact that it gives you an increased sense of your troops' line of sight, doing away with the 'fog of war' contrivance.

In keeping with this idea of streamlining, there are a fairly small number of units – riflemen, engineers, tanks, transport, artillery, gunships and a command vehicle – but each is incredibly customisable. Since each surviving unit persists from battle to battle, the individualisation not only makes a tactical difference to your troops but is intended to give you a sense of ownership over them. No doubt this will become important in the game's online component – offering a persistent world war between the three factions: Russia, Europe and the US (analogous to orcs, elves and humans).

Battles were fairly quick affairs and fell into two gametypes: Annihilation, in which you had a full complement of troops from the outset, much like in *Total War*, and Conquest, in which a series of control points had to be captured and reinforcements 'earned'. Doomsday weapons, unlocked in the final stages of a battle, offer the chance to grab victory from the jaws of defeat in explosive fashion, and epitomise the way in which the game has been tuned to fast, brash gameplay with a strong console bias.



Seeds of change

The mastermind behind some of the most innovative titles of the last generation is setting his sights on the next. We catch up with Clover graduate Atsushi Inaba

Atsushi Inaba was head of Clover Studios and the producer behind many of its finest moments, including *Steel Battalion*, *Viewtiful Joe*, *Okami* and *God Hand*. Following Capcom's decision to dissolve Clover, he and much of the team's talent left to form Seeds in late 2006 – which will release its first title under the name of PlatinumGames. We spoke to him about the companies he's been involved with, how developers see the industry today, and venturing into the great unknown.

So there's Capcom, then Clover, then Seeds, and now PlatinumGames, all showing a movement away from bigger operations. Was this inevitable for you?

I think it was inevitable. I don't know if it was Capcom, or if it would have been the same for me at other game-makers. Wait – I was at SNK as well before joining Capcom, and I didn't like that company too much either! Seriously, I left at a time when many quit Capcom. But I don't think it's the company or the person that's responsible in these situations: the fact is that what you can do inside a big company is limited. It is possible to do interesting and huge projects, but there is always this gap forming and then widening between what you want to do and the level of creative freedom you're allowed. If I could have had that at Capcom, I would have remained, but that wasn't the case.

Do you think true originality is becoming almost impossible at big companies?

I don't think it is entirely impossible, as Capcom is currently releasing original titles. But I don't think those original titles have dynamic or challenging new concepts: making something new isn't enough, it also has to have a certain level of 'quality', whatever that means. So when you consider the whole situation, it's a problem for a big company to take risks because large resources are involved. Conversely, when you are

What is now possible that you couldn't do when you were at Clover?

Many things, but initially also lots of limitations because of the limits in staff and resources. We have to do everything from A to Z, and a lot of technical work, but at the same time have total freedom. We understand that this doesn't mean we can do whatever we want, because that would lead to our demise. What we can do is what big companies are reluctant to do. They prefer, and for good business reasons, to go the

"We can't just do whatever we want, because that would lead to our demise. What we can do is what big companies are reluctant to do"

a small company, your survival is staked on every title. In a sense, that suits us at PlatinumGames better for our creative life.

Why, after leaving Clover, did you name your company Seeds? Don't things usually grow in the other direction?

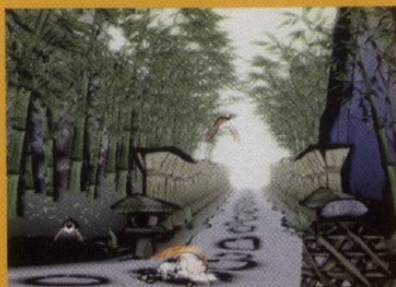
I think we needed to get back to basics, and rethink our approach to games. In that sense, there was a need for the clover to return to its seed. We also used to release games without considering anything like the concept of 'genre', and this is something we want to continue. When a flower sprouts from a seed, there is a level of surprise as you don't know for sure what will grow out. This is the same idea behind Seeds, and we won't release any games under the Seeds name. We've changed the name to PlatinumGames for our first title.

safest way. Looking at western games we see that originality and risk can pay off with titles like *Gears Of War* or *God Of War*. That doesn't mean I think that series are bad – *Halo 3* is a great title, and *Call Of Duty 4* as well. What I want is to have the size of company which will let us challenge ourselves in the same way.

Which one of the games you made at Clover Studio or Capcom are you most proud of?

In terms of Clover, it's *Okami*. Not only does it have creativity, originality and quality, I hope it also provided users with an experience they hadn't had before. But *Okami* wasn't a commercial success. If I think about why, it





The atmosphere and scope of *Okami* puts most modern videogames to shame, though sadly didn't translate to sales – the announcement of a Wii port (though not handled by PlatinumGames) will hopefully lead to belated success

would be too simple to say that it is because of the market, or users who are not paying attention. I believe the reasons are our responsibility. I think we tried too hard to include lots of appealing side dishes and other things in the game without thinking about the overall experience itself. We were confident about it, but we may have not seen how difficult to understand it was for users coming to *Okami*. 'What kind of game is it?' is a fair question in some ways. Maybe we should have removed from *Okami* some of what we thought was appealing, or even lowered our quality requirements to think more about the game as a whole experience. Nevertheless, it was a success in terms of content and since we don't have such an ambitious project planned any time soon, I feel personally very satisfied to have made such a game. It was certainly a milestone in Clover's creativity, and a key moment in our development as a studio.

Which of the properties you created at Capcom and Clover would you most like to work on one more time?

In a purely creative sense, it would be *Viewtiful Joe*. I'd like to really wring all of the inherent potential out of the concept. Another idea would be to redo *Okami*, like the recent DS *Zelda*. There are ideas we weren't able to include in both games which are still in our minds.

Are you going to reuse these ideas in other titles, or just put them behind you and start again from scratch?

I think the only way is to go with something completely new and original. Having said that, we are known for our action games, so you might see us making a title that incorporates elements of that strength. But we have lots of ideas outside of that, and this is our chance to develop them.

Now that you're independent from Capcom, are you offered a lot of work in Japan? And what about overseas?

Yeah, we have a lot of offers. When we decided to make a company named Seeds, it wasn't our intention to make it public. But we had to gather some staff, and so we had to make the name public in a way – but we tried not to make it too loud. But it's hard to keep a secret in our industry, and when Seeds became generally known about we had lots of offers. I'd say that most of the big western companies contacted us. They are not asking us to make games for them, but are interested in knowing what we want to do, how we intend to work and the like. For the moment, we are following up a few partnerships we already had in mind when forming Seeds, so when those projects are finished, perhaps we could think about working with a western company if the project is good. But as for now, we have too many offers and have to refuse them. This is part of the freedom we gained by quitting Capcom, I think.

With Clover, your role as head of studio meant dealing with issues that are not directly related to game development. Now you're going fully independent, do you think you'll have an even harder time concentrating on creative work?

Managing a company is difficult, but with Seeds it is indeed harder. But the difference is that this time I will get back to the producer role, and find someone to take charge of the company. I want to focus and have more input on what we are going to create and how.

Do all of the employees of Seeds come from Clover?

For a lot of them that's the case. We have around a dozen new faces. Mr Mikami [Shinji Mikami, creator of the *Resident Evil* series and ex-Capcom star] is also with us, of course.

In an industry so dominated by Nintendo, and knowing that Nintendo is selling the most on its platforms, how does a new company approach such a market, especially with more core-gamer-focused content?

I was annoyed by Sony's whole behaviour over the price cuts, because the opinion of the entire industry here was against them. The Wii and the DS are selling very well, but in terms of software Nintendo is obviously the best-selling developer

well in Europe. As for Sony, the power of the brand may be good in Japan and overseas but there are just not enough machines installed. To be honest, we almost wish for a platform on the market that is none of the above. But of course this isn't possible, so we'll have to adapt to the market.

At the Tokyo Game Show in September, mobile phone games had a surprisingly strong presence. Do you see that market as a possible business opportunity for a smaller company such as yours?

I think it is an important business chance. But it is not our goal to test ourselves in that market, not yet. Our priority is to continue to do what we are good at. We still want to better ourselves on consoles and release a masterpiece. When our name is established and we have more room to manoeuvre then, yes, we would consider other markets. You have to look at what you're

"The Japanese videogame industry was dynamic and we were admired. But that time is past. We need to really work hard to recover"

by far. It has the best understanding of the new market it has created. Nintendo can be very happy about the situation right now, but for a developer like us, and we're probably in the majority, the situation is difficult. Do we go with the Xbox 360? Our game then might be successful in the US, but there is no market in Japan and I don't have the feeling it is doing that

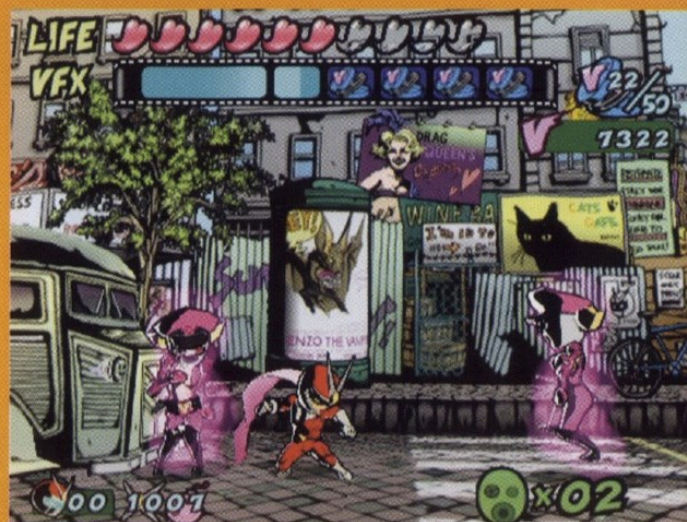
good at. In that sense, don't expect us to make an online game – we simply couldn't do one at this stage. That doesn't mean, incidentally, that we don't have any ideas about using some online features in future games.

Will you look at the Japanese market first, then overseas, or try for a global approach?

Overseas. It's our challenge to succeed outside Japan. The market overseas is enormous and dynamic. Of course we will work for the Japanese market as well. Of course we will try to have a game selling everywhere, but overseas is a very big target for us. It is a challenging task, as it is difficult to understand tastes outside of Japan. If I ask a character designer to draw some cool characters, what we think is great won't necessarily be the same outside Japan. And if I ask him to think about cool characters for



God Hand, an offbeat ode to punching things repeatedly, and then punching them some more, quickly gained a cult following thanks to its bizarre scripting and inspired credits



Viewtiful Joe, the title to which Inaba would most like to return, has not been well served by its sequels, which have typically toyed with the central concept rather than 'wringing it out'

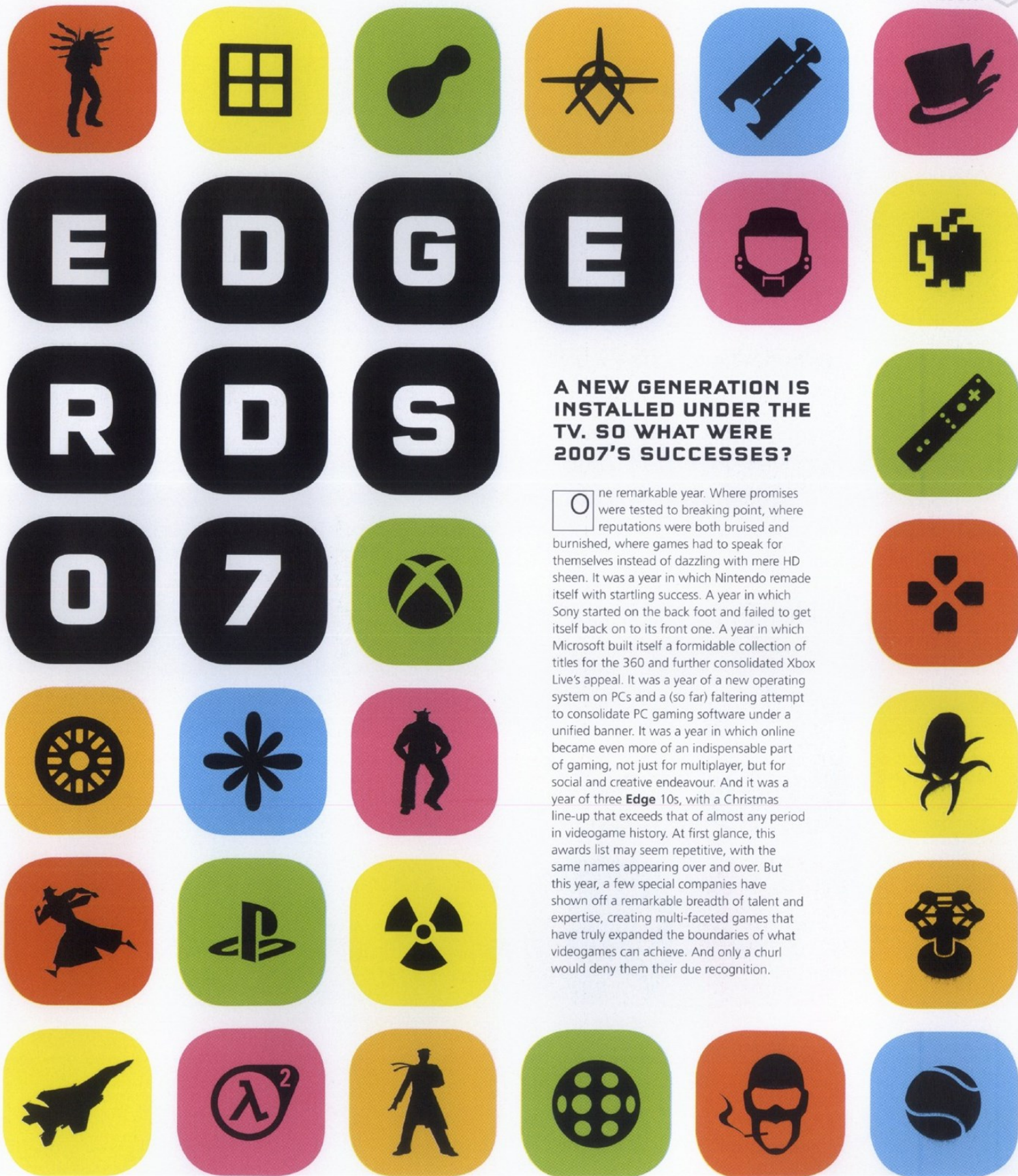
overseas players, he will certainly be puzzled by how to do that. Take a game like *God Of War*. This is a game which has a very strong flavour of Japanese games as we used to make them. We should have made such a title, and we still need to refocus on this. Because we have forgotten about our own essence, you don't see many successful Japanese games abroad today. I believe there will be cycles – sometimes the Japanese creations will be very dynamic, and sometimes the west.

With the staff you have within your company, can't you create characters that have the same kind of impact as those that previously came out of Capcom and Clover?

Of course, we have very talented people in our company who have created some of the best characters in Japanese videogames. But there is no meaning in trying to show that you are the most talented artist. You need to learn about the tastes and cultures of others. This need to listen, look and learn is stronger than ever with me. Back when we were making those big titles, the Japanese videogame industry was dynamic and we were admired. People found our work great. But that time is past, and we are now the challengers. As the Japanese companies merge and get bigger, they are more limited in what they are willing to do. It is up to companies like ours to meet this challenge. If we don't, I fear our industry here is doomed, and I feel more concerned when I see what is happening around me. The gap is huge now, and we need to really work hard to recover. We want to be a part of this.



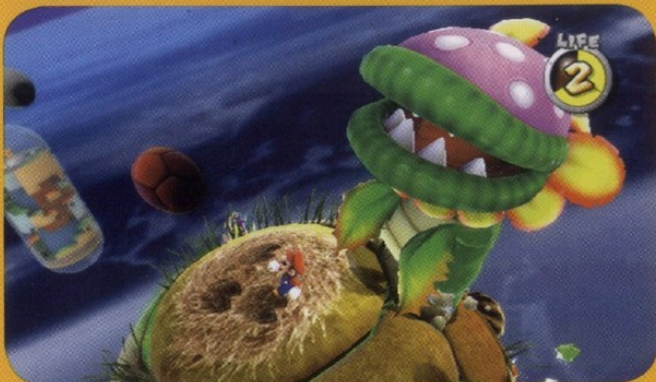




A NEW GENERATION IS INSTALLED UNDER THE TV. SO WHAT WERE 2007'S SUCCESSES?

One remarkable year. Where promises were tested to breaking point, where reputations were both bruised and burnished, where games had to speak for themselves instead of dazzling with mere HD sheen. It was a year in which Nintendo remade itself with startling success. A year in which Sony started on the back foot and failed to get itself back on to its front one. A year in which Microsoft built itself a formidable collection of titles for the 360 and further consolidated Xbox Live's appeal. It was a year of a new operating system on PCs and a (so far) faltering attempt to consolidate PC gaming software under a unified banner. It was a year in which online became even more of an indispensable part of gaming, not just for multiplayer, but for social and creative endeavour. And it was a year of three **Edge** 10s, with a Christmas line-up that exceeds that of almost any period in videogame history. At first glance, this awards list may seem repetitive, with the same names appearing over and over. But this year, a few special companies have shown off a remarkable breadth of talent and expertise, creating multi-faceted games that have truly expanded the boundaries of what videogames can achieve. And only a churl would deny them their due recognition.

THE 2007 EDGE AWARD FOR BEST GAME



FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

SUPER MARIO GALAXY

It's the first steps that show Mario's maturity. The gentle introduction to his earthbound movement on the way to Peach's castle. The rabbit's call of 'Let's play' when he arrives on his first planet. The glimpse, as he jets between planetoids in the first full level, of the shower of discrete droplets of play he'll be provided with throughout the game. And then the nod to more open *Super Mario 64*-style adventuring in the Honeyhive Galaxy. In these formative moments, Janus-headed *Galaxy* confirms that it has everything you were hoping for: bright flashes of the new and the comforting warmth of the old. But it never feels old. Always shifting the ground beneath Mario's feet, whether literally or by constantly changing the nature of his challenge, *Galaxy* surprises and delights at every turn, placing both familiar and new tasks firmly in its own, distinct, masterpiece of a universe. In short, it's utterly true to Mario's roots, and yet is fixed firmly on his future, too.

THE 2007 EDGE AWARD FOR BEST INNOVATION



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **BUNGIE**

HALO 3

Halo 3 is indisputable proof of how closely Bungie knows its games' players. It knows what they value, why they play and how they play. It therefore built *Halo 3* to express what its fans dreamt it could be: fourplayer online co-op, a level editor, screenshots, and the best matchmaking system in the world. But Bungie made *Halo 3* much more than just what its fans thought they wanted. Instead of a vanilla screenshot mode, it has a full theatre mode. Level editing is live and collaborative, and even part of the multiplayer itself. Co-op includes a deep scoring system that provides welcome competition while battling together. It allows players to share their films, screenshots, maps and gametypes with each other. While none of these features is truly new to videogames, they have never been so thoroughly and accessibly incorporated into such a supremely coherent whole. *Halo 3* is the result of a company considering its games' players like no other.

RUNNER-UP THE ORANGE BOX



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA/VALVE**
DEVELOPER: **VALVE**

It's not that *The Orange Box* is just an incredibly good deal. It is, of course; three new games on one disc. It's not just that it also includes the still-inspirational *Half-Life 2*. It's that every element of this package of games is so tuned, so focused, so considered. And while each is a contrasting and self-sufficient experience in its own right, they fit logically into a brilliant whole.

RUNNER-UP HALO 3



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **BUNGIE**

Few games have had to live up to the scrutiny that *Halo 3* has. It had to satisfy lovers of its multiplayer. It had to atone for the perceived failings of *Halo 2*'s singleplayer. It had to build upon all the principles the series has worked so hard to establish, principles that are now taken as standard tenets of FPS design. And, even beyond expectation, it has succeeded.

RUNNER-UP CRYSIS



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **CRYTEK**

Technically, *Crysis* is a vision of the future. Well, it will be when your PC is capable of running it with all the options cranked up. It's a roadmap for the next few years of PC technology, a framework for creating worlds that behave and appear that little bit more natural. And with *Sandbox2* it also includes one of the most versatile level-editing tools ever made.

RUNNER-UP PORTAL



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA/VALVE**
DEVELOPER: **VALVE**

Portal is the true successor to the triumphs Valve achieved with *Half-Life 2*. It presents a new tool with which to manipulate game environments, a set of puzzle scenarios that perfectly exploit it and an affecting story that's as nuanced as you care to interpret. Its subtle but powerful recasting of videogame conventions profoundly reinvigorates the medium.

THE 2007 EDGE AWARD FOR BEST VISUAL DESIGN



FORMAT: 360, PC
PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES
DEVELOPER: 2K BOSTON/
2K AUSTRALIA

BIOSHOCK

When you think of *BioShock*, you think of a place, somewhere, set in a specific period and expressive of a specific culture. Ken Levine's team's great accomplishment is that so much of Rapture's nature is communicated through its remarkable art style, an intricately imaginative blend of Bakelite and bronze, Art Deco and applied science that no videogame – or any other visual medium – has explored before. Humanist statements are proclaimed on dominating banners and hulking inhuman statues loom out of the undersea murk. But for all its totalitarian oppressiveness, Rapture can also be beautiful, full of delicate touches and personal stories. That's until you see the rot, the moral decay, the destruction that 2K's art team has resolved equally well. Abandoned placards, smears of blood, leaking walls and corroding metal expose Rapture's terrible secrets. The result is a game that you visit, a document of the horror in rampant idealism.

THE 2007 EDGE AWARD FOR BEST AUDIO DESIGN



FORMAT: Wii
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

SUPER MARIO GALAXY

To emphasise Mario's giant leap into space, *Galaxy's* music score has jumped from the jaunty MIDI of old to rich orchestral opuses, lending his euphoric progression through its stages a new, grander, even epic, pace. But, in the tradition of all *Mario* tunes, it's just as catchy, and before you even consider that you're missing the careless cheer of the melodies of old, it's playing them too, remixed into throwaway ditties and full themes. Just as the game continually throws Mario between each self-contained novelty, the music constantly changes, from lush symphonics to urgent 8bit *allegro* movements. The dynamism of the score is further enhanced by sequences where the music is affected by Mario's movement – its speed during ball-rolling sections, and when it plays as he collects a series of coloured notes. Special note must also be made of *Galaxy's* sound effects, a sparkle of distinctive samples that masterfully signal every action Mario makes and incident around him.

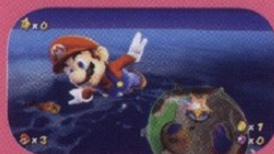
RUNNER-UP TEAM FORTRESS 2



FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3
PUBLISHER: EA/VALVE
DEVELOPER: VALVE

TF2's Tex-Avery-meets-Leyendecker art style is a perfect balance of functionality and pleasure. Each character's distinctive silhouette effortlessly conveys its capabilities and is irresistibly charismatic, from the Heavy's gleeful gun fetish to the wisp of the Spy's cigarette smoke. The maps are equal feats of practicality and charm, leading to a wonderful engaging individuality.

RUNNER-UP SUPER MARIO GALAXY



FORMAT: Wii
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

It's already become ubiquitous, but Mario's rim-lighting is integral to his vivid universe, making him stand out even when everything else dazzles with colour. It enhances his welcome return to surreality, emphasising the plump planetoids and their extraordinary inhabitants. The imagination on offer is almost too much to take in, but dangers and the way to go are always clear.

RUNNER-UP HALO 3



FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER: BUNGIE

With 60,000-odd sound samples, *Halo 3* boasts a videogame soundscape of spectacular dynamism. Whether it's the variety and aptness of NPC comments, which give so much credence to your actions, or the immense detail with which effects are resolved, from the chimes of bullet casings to the resonance of Forerunner halls, its quality is consistently fantastic.

RUNNER-UP COLIN MCRAE: DIRT



FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3
PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

OK, ignore Christian Edstrom's cloyingly cheesy encouragements ("Smooth and steady. I'm Mr Smooth and you're Mr Steady"), and think about *Dirt's* superlative aural rendering of a rally car – its squeaks, squeals, roars and groans as it tears over so many different surfaces and becomes more damaged. Want to know what's happening to the car? Just listen.

THE 2007 EDGE AWARD FOR BEST ONLINE EXPERIENCE



FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER: BUNGIE

HALO 3

It shouldn't be the case, but *Halo 2*'s multiplayer matchmaking system still stands head and shoulders over its competition. And with *Halo 3*, Bungie has made it even better. It is tuned still finer, making the process even more accessible and reliable in matching you with players of appropriate skill. And there are new modes that work online, like Forge and Theatre, which lend new ways to collaborate and play together, and that's aside from online co-op, which allows four people to play through the chaos of campaign. Sharing screenshots, film clips, Forge maps and custom gametypes is brilliantly straightforward, and the interface to it all is superbly streamlined and consistent. And then you have Bungie.net, an incredible repository of game statistics on every game played online. No other game boasts the scope of *Halo 3*'s online component, and the reward is the investment of its players: how creative they've been with the tools it supplies and the skills they've developed.

THE 2007 EDGE AWARD FOR BEST HARDWARE



FORMAT: 360, PS3
MANUFACTURER:
EA/HARMONIX

ROCK BAND

OK, forget about the reports of downstrumming defects with early production models of the guitar, and the fact that Microsoft's proprietary wireless technology for Xbox 360 means that the rigmarole of plugging in all four devices is a roadie's job that generates a rat's nest of wires. *Rock Band*'s plastic instruments have created a new standard for videogame peripherals. The drums have proved sturdy under the most enthusiastic pounding, the microphone is weighty and the guitar, a superbly glossy Fender Stratocaster, no longer produces the cacophony of tacky clattering that accompanies a *Guitar Hero* session. The measure of their success is how seamlessly they allow players to start rocking after taking them up for the first time. With the full *Rock Band* pack, which includes drums, a guitar, microphone and the game at a mere \$160 (under £80), it's a wonder that EA and Harmonix have been able to produce such quality at such a low price.

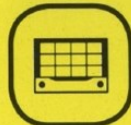
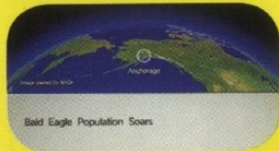
RUNNER-UP FORZA 2



FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER:
MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER:
TURN 10

Few driving games really push the need to tinker with the tuning options that they offer, but the rigour that multiplayer brings to *Forza 2* adds a new dimension to its intricacies. It's not for everyone: it requires dedication to buy and tweak the car that's right for you in each speed class. But it reaps great reward in the tight community that has grown around it.

RUNNER-UP WII CHANNELS



FORMAT: Wii
PUBLISHER:
NINTENDO
DEVELOPER:
IN-HOUSE

Perhaps it's because of the atypical way the Wii integrates online, but *Wii Channels* are underappreciated. They've proved a pleasurable and practical source of information and entertainment, from the random amusements of Mii Contest to the beguiling globe interface of the News Channel. Their tickertapes constantly shifting, they add playful serendipity to turning on the Wii.

RUNNER-UP NINTENDO DS



MANUFACTURER:
NINTENDO

At last, DS controls have become normalised among game designers and the public, and companies other than Nintendo have also begun to master them. Of course, Nintendo is still creating the best, like *Phantom Hourglass*, but doing things like turning the console into an English language tutor for a Japanese business qualification show its inspiringly wide potential.

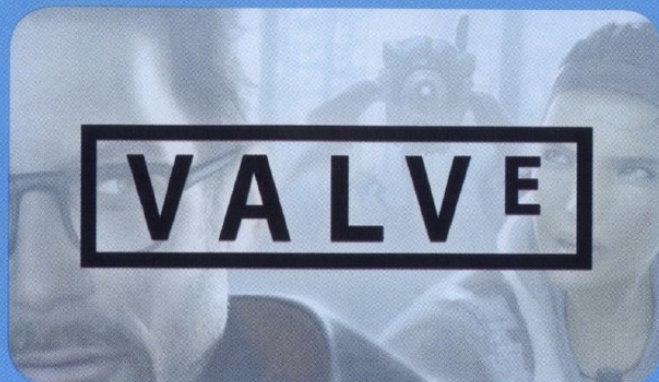
RUNNER-UP NINTENDO Wii



MANUFACTURER:
NINTENDO

Through 2007, the 'underpowered' and non-conformist Wii has done the exceptional: confounded all expectation to far surpass the sales figures of both its competitors. The Wii Remote has proved itself technically adept, even if little of its software catalogue has taken full advantage of it, and *Mario Galaxy* has proved its graphical oomph. Small and quiet, it's a joy to own.

THE 2007 EDGE AWARD FOR BEST DEVELOPER

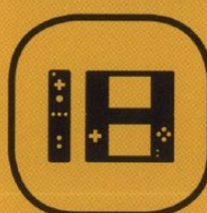
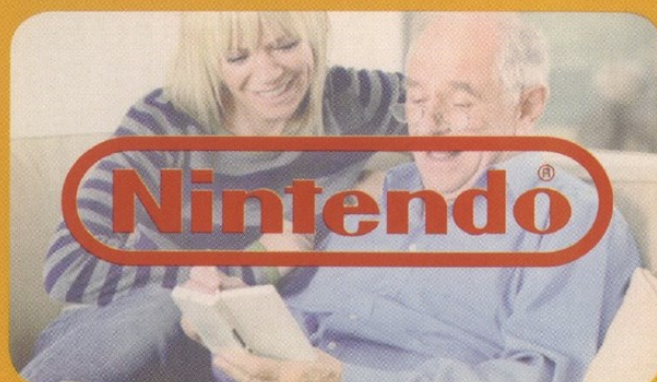


GAMES: **THE ORANGE BOX**

VALVE

It's probably partly due to the independence afforded by Steam that Valve's unorthodox practices have blossomed, but, equally, its success is predicated on the unusual thinking of its unusually brilliant people. That over half these employees have been plucked from the mod scene in part explains the passionate, almost self-effacing, dedication to their fans. It's something that comes down from the very top: Valve's outspoken leader, Gabe Newell, commits himself to reading every email the company receives from its fans. No other developer this year has done so much for its customers: Steam's new community features serve an installed base now exceeding that of 360, and the company has broached new territory with *The Orange Box*, a product that excels in both quantity and quality, shaped by Valve's attention to its audience – proving not simply that it can afford its eccentricities, but that its greatness is born of them.

THE 2007 EDGE AWARD FOR BEST PUBLISHER



GAMES: **SUPER MARIO GALAXY, METROID PRIME 3, PHANTOM HOURGLASS, POKÉMON DIAMOND/PEARL, BIG BRAIN ACADEMY, HOTEL DUSK, OUENDAN 2**

NINTENDO

This year, Nintendo has been a chameleon. It has made itself almost invisible in advertising for the mainstream media, content to hide behind celebrities and its Touch Generations logo. And yet it has flaunted, even celebrated, itself in publishing updates to its classic franchises, *Mario*, *Zelda* and *Metroid*. Bouyed by the enormous success of its strategy to gain massmarket appeal, Nintendo's stance indicates an impressive degree of self-confidence, as does its continuing policy of publicising games that have been out for more than just a couple of months: still visible are *Nintendogs* on TV ads and *Hotel Dusk* on billboards. And despite this dual personality, the company has managed to create a singular identity, paired closely with the appearance and feel of its consoles, of simplicity and social fun. The measure of the huge degree to which Nintendo has transformed the market for videogames over the last year is in the emergence of its many imitators.

RUNNER-UP BUNGIE



GAMES: **HALO 3**



Lots of developers have ambition, but few have the capacity to realise it, and even fewer push their ambitions almost beyond what they can achieve. Bungie is one of those very few, a company that is never content to merely meet the expectations of its publisher and fans, but to surpass them. The pride Bungie has in its work shines, and with *Halo 3*, it's worth it.

RUNNER-UP NINTENDO



GAMES: **SUPER MARIO GALAXY, SIGHT TRAINING, PHANTOM HOURGLASS**



Nintendo's remarkable capacity for variety was proved in 2007, creating gamer-friendly opuses like *Super Mario Galaxy* and *Phantom Hourglass*, and playthings like *Sight Training* for non-gamers. They all sport Nintendo's excellent grasp of interface, showing that, while other developers insist on toying with technology, Nintendo uses it to create inspiring toys.

RUNNER-UP MICROSOFT



GAMES: **HALO 3, MASS EFFECT, FORZA 2, PGR4, CRACKDOWN, SCENE IT?**



Ironically, it was only at the end of 2007, as Microsoft began to release its biggest games, that the cracks began to show: Bungie going it alone, Bizarre Creations snapped up by Activision, BioWare by EA. But what games they made, just for Microsoft, to create a lineup that has given the 360 a solid footing in every genre, and a real chance for it to finally make some cash.

RUNNER-UP EA



GAMES: **CRYSIS, SKATE, THE SIMPSONS, ROCK BAND**



For all its continuing commitment to churning out new instalments of its safe old franchises, EA is also putting a great deal of its resources into braver new games. The freedom it granted Crytek in completing *Crysis*, its investment in the dizzying idea that is *Rock Band*, taking on Tony Hawk and beating him with *Skate*: EA knows its obligation to the future.

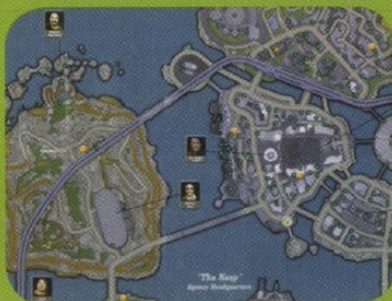
THE ALTERNATIVE EDGE AWARDS 2007

THE GONGS GO TO THE BIG HITTEES,
BUT SOMETIMES IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS
THAT MAKE THE DIFFERENCE. HERE'S
A SELECTION OF THINGS THAT, IN THEIR
OWN SPECIAL WAY, MARKED OUT 2007

TOKEN EFFORT CRACKDOWN

FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER: REALTIME WORLDS

Many games pad out their play time with the option of collecting trinkets. *Crackdown* turns the convention on its head – the rest of the game serves as the backdrop for seeking out every last agility orb. Each one increases your acrobatic skills, enabling ever more ambitious climbs and further fuelling your addiction. *Assassin's Creed* should take note.



LATE TO THE PARTY DUALSHOCK 3

FORMAT: PS3
MANUFACTURER: SONY

A slow round of applause for the resurrection of rumble – Sony's "last-generation feature". When *Lylat Wars* introduced us to it, we never guessed how important such feedback would become. In fact, perhaps we didn't really appreciate it until it was taken away – playing rumble-less PS3 versions of *Dir*t and *Sega Rally* underscores just how integral it has become.



LUSHNESS ETERNAL SONATA

FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: ATARI
DEVELOPER: TRI-CRESCENDO

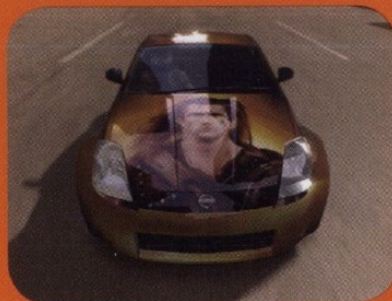
From the moment it begins, *Eternal Sonata* presents a gentle riot of lavishness to your eyes and ears. Even the sewers are impossibly pretty, shot through with beams of golden light, sparkling water (water?) and teeming with luxuriant vegetation. Every tune is richly resonant, every sound effect dramatic. Fitting, therefore, to Chopin's musical Romanticism.



BRAVE KARTS FORZA 2

FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER: TURN 10

Letting loose the creativity of players was always going to be a gamble, but Turn 10 took it in furnishing *Forza 2* with a livery-editing tool and an online auction house. The result has been a proliferation of porn, the odd racist attack and bizarre attempts at marketing game cheats, along with some genuinely jawdropping paintjobs. And Mel Gibson.



VICTORY FROM THE JAWS OF DEFEAT STALKER

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: GSC GAME WORLD

It shouldn't have worked: a ragtag bunch of game devs, a spiralling open-world concept, and one of the most off-kilter settings in videogames. But, by hook or by crook, it did. *Stalker* ended up a success, despite the evident battle that rages under the hood between emergent play and scripted situation. It plays by its own rules, but rules that, somehow, function.



CONSOLE CHOICE 360, PS3, Wii

MANUFACTURER:
MICROSOFT, NINTENDO, SONY

A PS3 with a 60GB or 40GB HD? Oh, actually, the 60GB one's not available any more. Damn. A 360, then. But with a 120GB hard drive, or will 20GB be enough? And should I wait until the 65nm units appear, because they're meant to be more reliable, aren't they? Well, at least you know where you are with a Wii. If only I could find one in the shops, that is.



INDIVIDUALISM SPACE GIRAFFE

FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER: LLAMASOFT

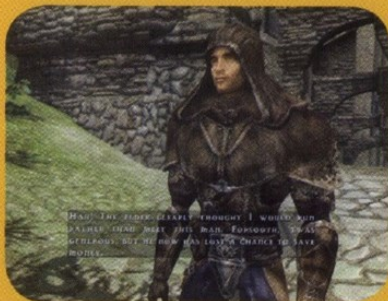
Space Giraffe's apparent lack of sales (at least according to its creator, Jeff Minter) is almost certainly due to its sheer bloodmindedness. In a climate in which videogames pussyfoot around their players, regulating the difficulty lest they reset and play something else, *Space Giraffe* demands they tap into its own, wilfully obtuse rhythm. Result: videogame Marmite.



UN SOUND FX**TWO WORLDS**

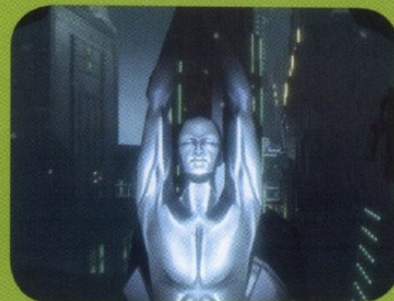
FORMAT: 360, PC
PUBLISHER: SOUTHPEAK
DEVELOPER: REALITY PUMP

You can live with most bad game audio, but *Two Worlds'* truly awful dialogue takes voice-acting to new levels. Forsooth, the faux old-speak be silly enough, but some of the monsters' sound effects are magnificently, guilelessly amateur. The orcish creatures' blarps and blurps are so comically inept as to already be the stuff of gaming legend.

**I CHOSE... RAPTURE****BIOSHOCK**

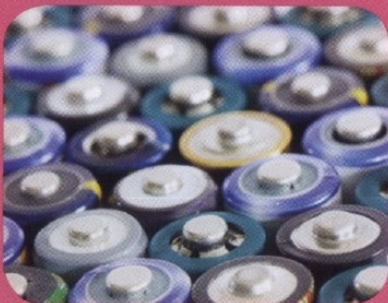
FORMAT: 360, PC
PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES
DEVELOPER: 2K BOSTON/AUSTRALIA

Your introduction to *BioShock's* submarine dystopia is among the most powerful openings in any game. Visually dazzling and dramatically astute, it prefaces your entry of Rapture with Ryan's vision of social paradise. It's hard to imagine any better way to illustrate his folly than to fleetingly glimpse the potential majesty of his ambition before you're plunged into its 'reality'.

**CLIPPED WINGS****WIRELESS PADS**

FORMAT: 360, PS3, Wii
MANUFACTURER:
MICROSOFT, NINTENDO, SONY

Last year we welcomed wireless technology with glee. No more would we face the task of unravelling controllers from the clot around our consoles, tug them from their sockets mid-game or topple beer bottles over with their flexes. Instead, we've found that we have simply exchanged one set of shackles for another: working batteries. Will we ever be free?

**BOARD AGAIN****XBOX LIVE ARCADE**

FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT

With the success of titles such as *Carcassonne* and *Settlers Of Catan*, board games have been getting a second lease of life on XBLA. And justifiably so, since *Carcassonne* and *Catan* are among the best titles on the system: simple to play, but full of deep emergent strategy. Best of all, since they do all the scoring, we've finally seen the end of arguing over our numeracy skill.

**THE STYLUS CARTOGRAPHER****PHANTOM HOURGLASS**

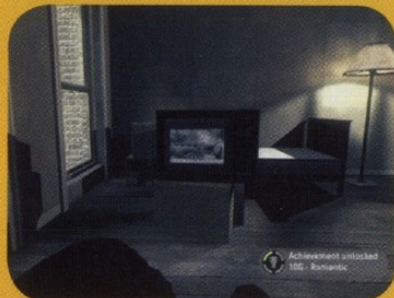
FORMAT: DS
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

While in *The Wind Waker's* tiresome treasure hunts you merely went to the spot you were told to, those in *Phantom Hourglass* are far more inspiring: scrawling the Xs yourself on the map from clues in the world or from NPCs makes the process interesting. Annotating something makes it yours, resulting in a journey that's more personal and affecting.

**POPCORN****THE DARKNESS**

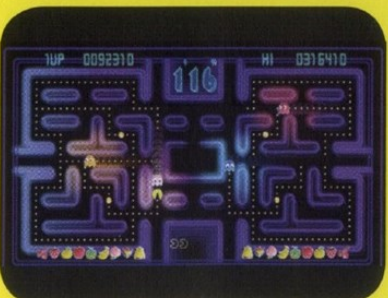
FORMAT: 360, PS3
PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES
DEVELOPER: STARBREEZE

After a long day devouring the hearts of mafia thugs and wasting hordes of Nazi ghouls, it's nice to cuddle up to your girlfriend in front of a classic movie. *The Darkness* has many charming idiosyncrasies, but watching all of *To Kill A Mockingbird* has to be among the most heartening moments in gaming, and sets up the horror of what follows a treat.

**RENEWAL****PAC-MAN CE**

FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: NAMCO-BANDAI
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Perhaps it was because *Pac-Man's* original designer, Toru Iwatani, was behind it, but *Pac-Man Championship Edition* is the best update to a classic videogame yet conceived. It genuinely builds upon its predecessor, retaining the purity of the original dynamic, hunted turning to hunter, while adding depth with varying modes and maze layouts. A new classic.

**COMEDY PLAY****VIDEO PARODIES**

FORMAT: FLASH

Mega 64 members bumping into Miyamoto while dressed up as Mario, Luigi and Link; *Street Fighter: The Later Years*; and more... Amusing videogame videos weren't new to 2007, but their proliferation and (thankfully) proficiency this year has kept us thoroughly entertained. And they'll likely continue to as production values rise and performances improve.



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Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Super Mario Galaxy



So true to its past, yet so effortlessly tuned for the present, it presses 3D into new, enchanting service. And full of things you just have to show to visiting friends.
WII, NINTENDO

Disgaea: Afternoon Of Darkness



Having finally been released in handheld form, Nippon Ichi's crazed reimagining of the strategy RPG is now playable in the bathroom without the American translation.
PSP, KOEI

Assassin's Creed



The shallow missions threaten to tear us away, but the craft with which the world is realised makes this a game to explore and wonder what might have been.
360, PC, PS3, UBISOFT

A higher purpose

Should games try to be anything more?



BlackSite's political message is relayed by a narrative that has its protagonist fighting on US soil against an enemy that his government has brought upon itself, a clear reference to the effects of real-world US foreign policy. It pulls back from any overt criticism, though

Games are a lot of things to a lot of people. They're art, they're a new frontier for storytelling, they're learning tools. And game-makers have lately been trying to have their creations live up to such expectation. There's *BioShock's* tread into 20th century American philosophy, there's *Call Of Duty 4's* attempt to convey the experience of being a soldier, and there's *BlackSite's* stab at politics.

None is wholly successful. But we're anxious to laud them all the same, because they're apparently pushing at the boundaries of what videogames can express and we often use them as validations of an emerging cultural form that the majority of society still devalues. But under the close scrutiny that this engenders they tend to crumble: *BioShock* fails to bind its inspirational story to its orthodox shooter gameplay; *BlackSite* has ended up a garbled mash of empty-headed liberalism and mutant slaying; *COD4* treads an uncomfortable line between upholding realism and being a form of entertainment.

In all these cases, the game and its 'higher' purpose are at odds. In fact, they are obfuscating with narrative and detail the abstract

rules that make up all videogames, as if they're uncomfortable with being games at all. Should games need to be anything more? We've played *Super Mario Galaxy* a lot this month, and it reminds us that they really don't.

Galaxy is unashamedly a videogame. Its story provides little more than a framework for its basic design – the need to negotiate myriad environments and the things you find there. It doesn't try to simulate or recreate reality, only adhere to its internal logic. At its heart, *Galaxy* is nothing other than a pitch-perfect blend of challenge and playful interaction.

And it has produced some of the most invigorating videogaming experiences we've had for a long while. Part of the reason is that *Galaxy* takes pride in its essential nature and its roots. It's unafraid to look back and reference gaming's past, yet it's also unafraid to push at videogames' boundaries, with some of the most complex 3D videogame space yet conceived.

Galaxy reminds us that games don't need to be imbued with qualities from other forms of culture to have value. In that sense, it's a valuable lesson to game-makers everywhere.



78 **Unreal Tournament III**
360, PC, PS3

80 **Rock Band**
360, PS3

82 **BlackSite: Area 51**
360, PC, PS3

84 **Battalion Wars 2**
Wii

85 **Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings**
DS

86 **Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles**
Wii

87 **Time Crisis 4**
PS3



87 **Ghost Squad**
Wii

88 **Aliens Vs Predator: Requiem**
PSP

88 **Endless Ocean**
Wii

89 **Contra 4**
DS

89 **Front Mission**
DS



90 **Rayman Raving Rabbids 2**
Wii

90 **Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games**
Wii

91 **Orcs & Elves**
DS, MOBILE

91 **SOCOM US Navy SEALs Tactical Strike**
PSP

Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



UNREAL TOURNAMENT III

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW (PC), JANUARY (PS3), TBC (360)
PUBLISHER: MIDWAY DEVELOPER: EPIC PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E168



In Warfare, capture-nodes can be seized instantly by means of an orb carried from HQ. It may threaten stalemates, but works because against the wise it becomes a fruitless, obvious gambit



Painting something in oil doesn't make an oil painting, not that *UT* cares. As uninspiring as its space marine chic can be, you can't deny it's appropriate. Unreal Engine 3 is in its element

Despite being the fourth game in the series, this is the third generation of *Unreal Tournament*, hence the somewhat erroneous title. On the surface, which of course comprises layer upon layer of corroded metal, much of it is familiar. Like *Quake 4*, there's only one visual trick up its sleeve: the ability to move more stuff at the last game's blistering pace. No mean feat when you consider that certain guns are loaded with as much geometry as an entire map in *UT2004*, but a lot of effort has been spent on simply reproducing that cast-iron look. No matter how you look at it, this is still a battle between Todd McFarlane action figures, even if you can see every sculpted scar and rivet.

Not that you should really care. Arena shooters are mechanisms, after all, and this is an amply tweaked example. The reduction of acrobatic skills, the neutering of the Flak Cannon (a slower rate of fire) and the increased manoeuvrability of vehicles have drastically affected, among other things, the life expectancy of the average player (a few extra seconds, at least, before you're chunked). They've produced a showier, faintly more forgiving game than before,

Get enough species and vehicles and it adopts an oddness of Yellow Submarine proportions, with all kinds of weird contraptions bouncing around

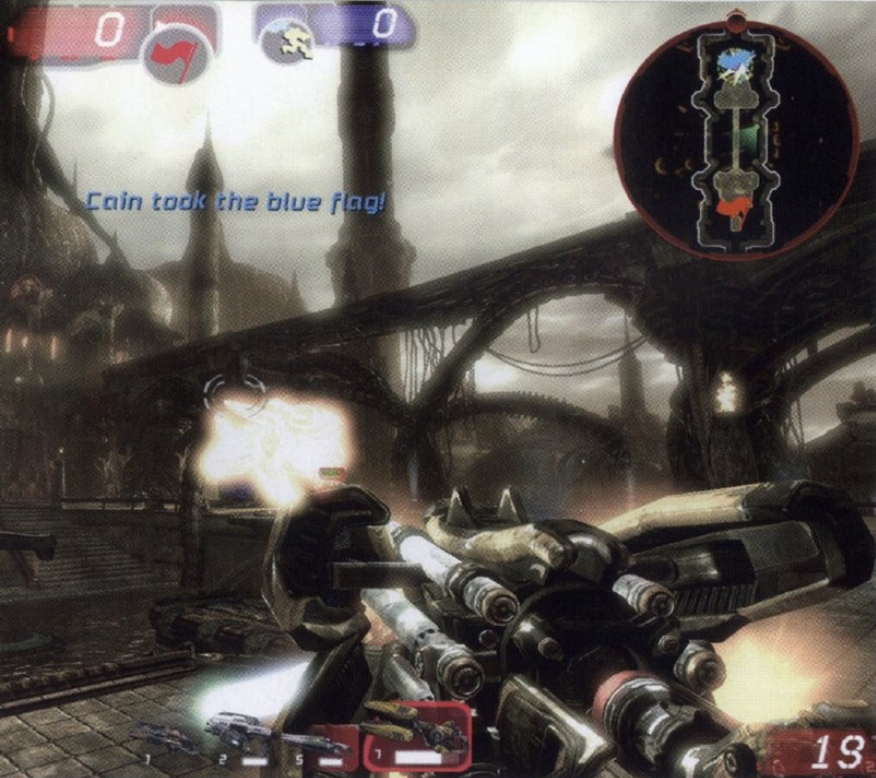


keen to address flaws without affecting global change. To eliminate treks between spawn points and action, Epic has taken the insane step of giving hoverboards to players of larger gametypes, putting steam in the strides of flag-bearers and frontline infantry at the expense of vital precision. But, as clumsy as they are, they do the job.

In the nicest possible way, this might be the most wall-to-wall bonkers shooter since *Daikatana*. Get enough species and vehicles into play and it adopts an oddness of Yellow Submarine proportions, with all kinds of weird contraptions bouncing around its maps. The Necris, its latest galactic scourge, have the zaniest units, ranging from War Of The Worlds-style Dark Walkers to armoured

spheres which grope about the terrain on tentacle legs. Fizzing electric balls, beams of light and chunks of shrapnel fill the air; vehicles clatter about and bash each other from every angle; newly spawned players have complete weapon sets within seconds.

That it survives, let alone excels, is thanks to a flawless logic which underpins the madness. The bigger something is in this game, the harder it will fall. The faster it moves, the quicker it explodes. And the more it hurts, the less it's allowed to. Balance, Epic knows, is the fulcrum of the deathmatch, and so long as everything dies just as easily as it kills, you can get away with almost anything. Ten weapons in play at once, for example, on over 50 bundled maps.



The new maps are diverse, though still look like the Borg have paid a visit. None make you gasp in admiration, though they do funnel everyone into tight firefights or, failing that, keep them on the run without getting lost



Words to the wise: move all pets and ceramics away from your speakers. Given even a modest sub, *UTIII*'s aural firepower is enough to have you looking like the Maxell man, claspng for a handheld as you fly off your chair

Hoverboards for every player and power-ups at every turn. Vehicle CTF games with brilliantly messy results. Even, perish the thought, an online shooter that anyone can enjoy.

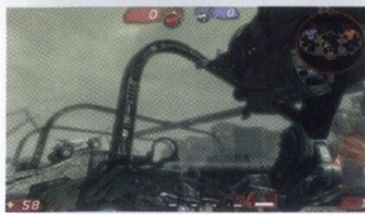
There's a bombshell to be dropped here, and it isn't that pocket nuke, the Redeemer. *UT*'s hardcore reputation, which once implied a game so brutal that you'd never know what hit you, isn't wanted any more. It's baggage, surplus to requirements. This is a slicker, deadlier package than before, if not necessarily for its players then certainly for its peers. While it wouldn't be *UT* without a few controversies – modes such as Bombing Run and Double Domination are out, left to modders to engineer – its knowledge of the genre's climate is laudable. People are fast tiring of elitist, time-swallowing games, steep learning curves and erratic framerates. More, perhaps, than even *Team Fortress 2*, this game has the answer.

It's the first deathmatch in an age to have the sense – the common decency, even – to include a comprehensive tutorial. Charting the Necris invasion of Earth by touring every gametype and map, its campaign provides something the online FPS (on PC, at least) has long deemed unnecessary – a point of



entry. Irrespective of talent, taste, spare time or even online connectivity, it has something for anyone with even a tingle in their trigger finger. Cunning bots, offline games and a cutscene-led story leave little room for cynicism: for all its plays to a new console audience, it's lost none of its old persona. The interface might need a patch or two, but the options therein are exhaustive.

Obviously, though, not everything can be changed with sliders and checkboxes. If *UTIII* has a problem then it's the same one it's always had – it's simply too much, too fast to properly cohere. There's much to love and a whole lot more to learn, but even novice gamers, after a few hours of offline sparring, will feel the lack. No matter how quick, precise or resourceful you become, you'll never hit the immaculate highs of a *Quake* or *Counter-Strike*. Thrills, yes, and a huge respect for Epic's massmarket savvy, but nothing so electric – or iconic – as a railgun to the head. [8]



UTIII's arsenal has lost none of its favourites, even if some have lost a small degree of brunt. The Redeemer, naturally, is back to cause some serious nuclear mischief

REVIEW

The magic number



To anyone familiar with mouse-look and WASD, *UTIII* on PS3 sounds like the worst idea in history. Until, that is, you discover that it actually supports mouse and keyboard, and, to Epic's eternal credit, supports mods as well. Console-only players should get on fine with twin-analogues, though the built-in unwieldiness of the PS3's sticks could potentially bother the player, especially when a hoverboard's involved. Also, when such a high framerate has been preserved, it seems a little wasteful to use anything but the crispest controls. Weapon-switching, at least, is aided by the game's configurable auto-switch priorities, which ensure that in the thick of things you need only grab your favourite gun before opening fire.



ROCK BAND

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), Q1 2008 (UK)
PUBLISHER: MTV, EA (DISTRIBUTOR)
DEVELOPER: HARMONIX PREVIOUSLY IN: E179, E181



Each song begins with a close-up of your musician that freezes into a black-and-white shot when they pose – a payoff for the time you've spent on their look

After the support act comes the headliner. *Rock Band's* arrival has been trumpeted with huge hype, both from those looking to take the *Guitar Hero* experience to a new level, and from those who see the potential of an evolution for videogames: a multimedia project that can cement a new mainstream method of interacting with music, and of course be the harbinger for many new revenue streams in a market caught somewhat on the hop by digital delivery. It's a headliner in every sense, from the developing pedigree of Harmonix to the corporate muscle of EA and MTV (which has \$30 million invested in marketing the game, as well as efforts across its own network), and its long-term success seems assured. But, as the game is very clear to remind us, there's a thin line between keeping it real and selling out.

So which side of the divide does it fall on? In terms of the core of the game, playing through the songs, it's as brilliantly tuned and authentic as we've come to expect from a Harmonix game. The note placement is thoughtful, the feeling of getting inside the rhythm of a song is there, and on the harder levels it's a gut-twister. The tracklisting that comes as standard (which will be tweaked for the European release) is well-pitched, a mixture of anthemic classics and familiar but less successful singles from the '60s to



The fabled x8 multiplier is triggered when band members use their 'energy' meters at the same time – of course, it depends on everyone hitting every note. Energy also has to be used to bring back failed bandmates, or the whole band will fail

the present day – and the DLC potential is limitless.

The solo tour follows much the same progression as *Guitar Hero*, with a linear route through increasingly grand venues to unlock songs and earn cash. It can seem a little lightweight, but that's only in comparison to *Rock Band's* reason for being: fourplayer multiplayer through a 'Band World

that won't bring in any money but has the credibility to win new listeners, or play a corporate party and earn the big bucks while alienating some of your fanbase?

Combined with the editor for your rock avatar, this level of customisation creates an involvement in the success of your digital demigods that goes far beyond what any music game has offered in the past.

It's easy to lose hours with the relatively few options that ultimately prove to offer the level of depth required for your own Ziggy Stardust

Tour'. In this, your band's success is no longer measured simply by your ability to complete songs: it is now linked to in-game choices along the route to stardom, which dictate the number of fans you have and the amount of money you can earn along the way. These choices can be fairly self-explanatory: should you play a benefit gig

Harmonix has always been adept at creating likeable and recognisable rock stereotypes, and in the character editor those talents are in full evidence – it's easy to lose hours fiddling with the relatively few options that ultimately prove to offer exactly the level of depth required for your own vision of Ziggy Stardust. As you progress through the game the likes of new clothes and accessories are unlocked, all part of the bizarrely compulsive ritual of tweaking your rock star just that little bit extra.

The Band World Tour and its associated customisation are a real change to the *Guitar Hero* format, and a successful one. But there are some caveats: *Rock Band* could be accused of taking itself a little too seriously in a way that its predecessors didn't. At times, outside of playing the songs themselves, it can feel a little too much like a band simulator, particularly when you have to repeat the same songs over and over in two-to six-song 'sets' at new venues. Still, there's always the quick play if you want to ignore all of the accoutrements of fame. This is a little fiddly to set up: each band member has control over signing in, a leader has total

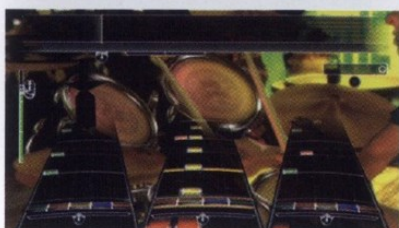


The drums are more difficult to pick up and play than the guitar ever was – but let's be honest, the guitar was never a million miles away from a standard controller, whereas the drumkit demands a new level of coordination from the off



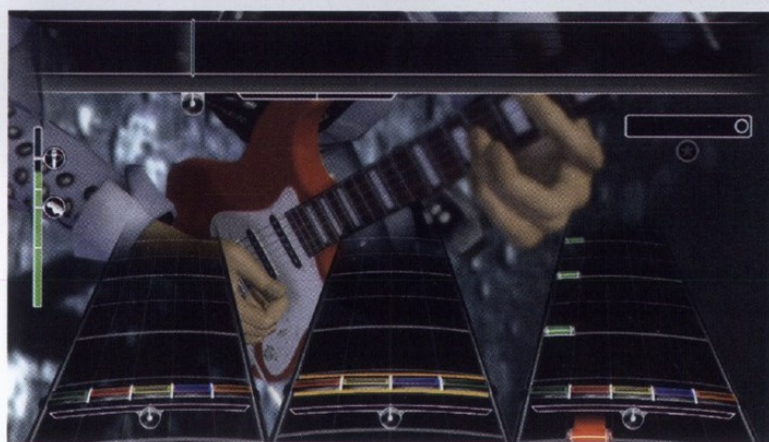


The look of the game is far in advance of Harmonix's work on the *Guitar Hero* series, and comes with some inspired touches, such as the increasing excitement of the crowd during a killer show. They'll even sing along



control over progressing through the screens, and each individual has the option of fiddling with unimportant details like the avatar. The concept of allowing each band member to be involved is laudable, but in practice it's a little messy – especially if you want to just pick up and play the game in a social setting – though hardly a dealbreaker.

In terms of the hardware, the new guitar controller's more sensitive buttons and lack of 'clicking' on the strum bar feel unusual at first. Both of these quickly come to feel better than what has gone before, however, with the new pinched end of the strum bar in particular an excellent addition. The drum kit is sturdy, but it has a few nigglesome qualities, including what often feels like a tiny divide between your hammering and audio response. Of more consequence to budding percussionists is the 'easy' difficulty setting, which perhaps should have been pitched even easier, given that the mechanics of the drumming process are more removed



Many songs begin with one of the instruments leading up to the big 'fall in' moment – which can be humiliating when you keep missing the notes in front of your bandmates, and a blast when you hit every single one with a swagger

from the traditional gaming experience than is the case with the button-driven guitars. When you're up to speed and in sync with a rhythm, though, the tub-smacking aspect of the package plays a big part in ramping up the quality of the *Rock Band* experience as a whole. The vocal tracks, meanwhile, are meant to be sung professionally and the microphone is certainly up to the job, although you may find yourself yearning for a little leeway (perhaps even as an optional setting), because flawless imitation feels more part of game convention than rock.

Minor gripes aside, *Rock Band* with four players in the same room is quite something to be a part of, a game not only an evolution of the genre but of the social side of gaming itself. If the whole caboodle is a little unwieldy to set up then that's the price that has to be paid for a unique experience – and if it falls short of perfection, that's only because it aims so high.

Finally, we should say that playing *Rock Band* at less than eardrum-shattering volume is doing both your band and the game a massive disservice. Turn. It. Up. [9]

Livin' la vida loca



Part of the 'band simulator' experience is the *Rock Band* website, which allows users to track their progress in the game and offers a variety of trinkets that vary between highly desirable and slightly odd. You can order customised clothes with your band's name emblazoned across them, make bumper stickers, create a band profile page, scan the classifieds for that killer bassist you're missing, or simply buy a figurine of your avatar. The sheer level of care that has gone into the experience is clear and cannot fail to raise a smile: what's the first thing most people in *Rock Band* will think of once their band is formed? If you're us, it's creating your own album cover for the first release, of course – and it's all part of the Harmonix experience.



BLACKSITE: AREA 51

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3
RELEASE: OUT NOW (360, PC), JANUARY 2008 (PS3)
PUBLISHER: MIDWAY DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E173, E178

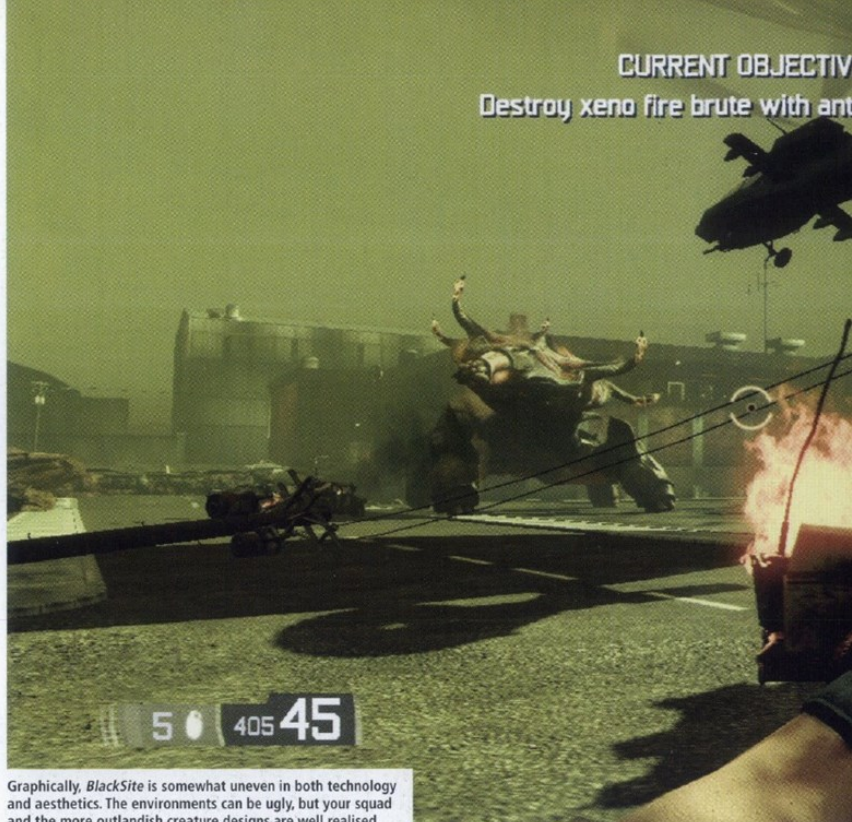


Your highly trained soldier character can't open doors. Instead, you have to order your team to do it for you – a decision presumably made to ensure that your squadmates don't get left behind

At a time when many games are scampering away from political controversy, Midway has been unusually keen to talk up this very aspect of *BlackSite*, selling it as an FPS with a subtext of subversive social commentary on the US military and governance. A game with opinions about our world, even inflammatory ones, might confirm that the medium is capable of more than scandalising the Mary Whitehouses with gore and loose morality. *BlackSite* doesn't fulfil this much-trumpeted remit – there's a smattering of heavy-handed dialogue, but the game never escalates its discussion of American power beyond a bland conspiracy theory concerning the nefarious use of alien technology gone wrong.

The game never escalates its discussion of American power beyond a bland conspiracy theory concerning the nefarious use of alien technology

The game confuses itself with its well-meaning statements of dissent – it issues garbled sentiments regarding Saddam's government and mishandles references to political hot potatoes like Abu Ghraib, dropping them in seemingly without understanding their actual meaning. Madly, for a game that makes such claims of



Graphically, *BlackSite* is somewhat uneven in both technology and aesthetics. The environments can be ugly, but your squad and the more outlandish creature designs are well realised

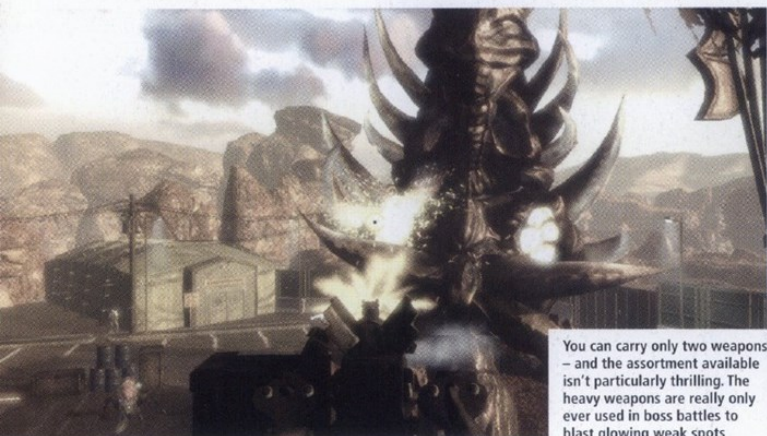
subversion, it almost ends up absolving those in the conspiracy – citing good intentions and poor administrative oversight – in favour of promoting a much more clearly insane bogeyman as your nemesis. He too makes a few token arguments to convince you of

average US grunt, and it's much more successful in its throwaway cynicism when cribbing from *Jarhead*'s fly-leaf than it is making vague digs at US hegemony. The dialogue and voice-acting is solid, although it's the wit of incidental banter between squadmates that is really its strength – there's a palpable drop in enthusiasm when it attempts to deliver on the hackneyed plot.

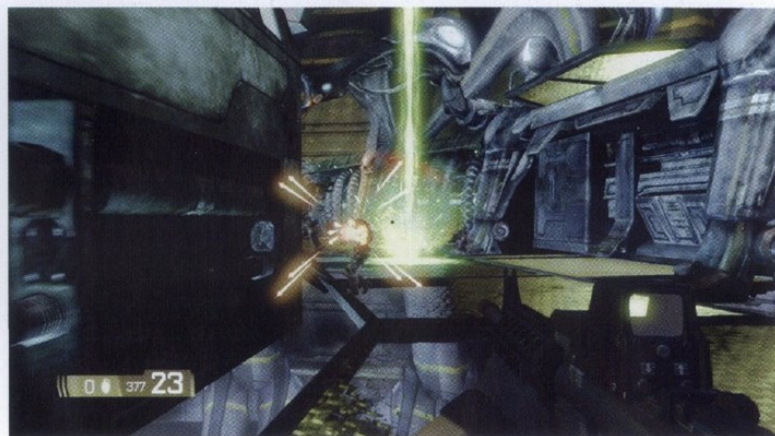
Being intellectually hollow, however, is not necessarily a huge disadvantage in the shooter genre. So long as *BlackSite*'s combat energises and entertains, its political credentials are of little importance. For the most part, the game manages to be just about acceptable in this regard. The gun battles against enemy troopers are fair, although it clearly wants for a cover system akin to *Rainbow Six: Vegas*. The game manages to reproduce what it has purloined

the US government's immorality – but then he is also a cackling maniac with glowing eyes and a penchant for genocide. It's difficult to put much stock in his words, especially since your personal morality is never really put into question.

However, *BlackSite* does have many a pointed thing to say about the plight of the



You can carry only two weapons – and the assortment available isn't particularly thrilling. The heavy weapons are really only ever used in boss battles to blast glowing weak spots



VE:
ntitank launcher.



The squad behaves with some reasonable intelligence, taking cover when appropriate and, although they will occasionally throw grenades at the back of your head, there's not much in the way of friendly fire. The major objectives are always up to you, of course, even though you can't speak



Squad morale gets a boost whenever you do particularly well, such as taking down enemies with headshots. The happier they are, the more effective they are; on the other hand, they'll whinge if you take too much damage. Sometimes the system is erratic and fails to reflect your actions

from other titles with some competence. Here are the gunship missions from *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2*, there are the scuttling, explosive critters from *Gears Of War*. Aren't those the Hunters from *Half-Life 2: Episode Two*? Isn't that the pricepoint of other, much better shooters released during the Christmas season? Driving missions are, of course, fitted as standard – but even though *BlackSite* keeps things ticking along at a reasonable pace, it all suffers from all being a little familiar and lacks the panache of the games from which it borrows.

Frustratingly, *BlackSite*'s occasional highlights are soured by an inundation of glitches and moments of ineptitude that suggest the game was more than a little hurried in the final stages of development. Dropped weapons float in mid-air; enemies clip through walls; vehicles get stuck to scenery; allies and enemies periodically warp from one place to another and seem to get confused about what they were doing; context-sensitive dialogue is uttered out of context. One set-piece inexplicably makes your opponent invulnerable until



It's a little staggering that Midway decided to drop co-op, without announcement, this late on in development and having claimed it as one of the game's major features. We can only assume it wasn't made playable in time for release

you cross the invisible boundary that triggers the boss-battle sequence – something you might not realise when you are already able to exchange fire at range. Then there's the tearing, the slowdown, the HDR oddities and the excessive rim-lighting that makes everyone look like they've been glazed with magical fairy dust.

Clocking in at somewhere between five or six hours in length, *BlackSite* is also surprisingly slight, and it only manages this length by unnaturally extending battles through repetitious waves of enemies and placing checkpoints at excessive intervals, forcing you to replay completely uneventful sections of the game before you get back into the combat. Bafflingly, the much-



trumpeted drop-in-drop-out fourplayer co-op mode has been axed from the game in its entirety, further reducing the reasons to revisit it. This again suggests that the developer wasn't able to get that feature into an acceptable state before it was forced to ship, despite the fact that Midway claimed that the entire game had been redesigned from the ground up to incorporate it. As it is, *BlackSite* is a thoroughly unexceptional title for which unrealistic promises were made, and one that is further let down by a wide assortment of bugs and design issues. Even without such problems, however, the current line-up of superlative shooters would ensure that *BlackSite*'s uninspired offering remained buried.

[4]

REVIEW

Misunderestimation



You rapidly begin to suspect that the creatures you encounter in *BlackSite* may be the result of the US government's clandestine experiments. Perhaps this really is intended as a pulpy allegory to the way that western nations have had a hand in creating the regimes that are now deemed threats – monsters of our own making. Are such superficial comparisons even worth making? The kind of player to whom the US armament of, say, the Afghan mujahideen would come as a revelation is unlikely to be able to follow allusions between *BlackSite*'s preposterous sci-fi and the real world.



BATTALION WARS 2

FORMAT: WII RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK, JAPAN)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: KUJU ENTERTAINMENT

Don't mention the war



One of *Battalion Wars 2*'s initial charms is the characterisation and graphical stylings of the various nations at war. Most of these are harmless enough approximations, with some sly poking: the Anglo-Isles are buffoonish public school types more concerned with eating their roast beef and looking after national monuments than fighting. But the sheen wears off after a point, when it becomes clear that all of the nations are half-good, half-bad, apart from Xylvania. Kuju could hardly have come up with a darker name for its stereotyped vision of Germany, which in this game is presented as a warmongering nation of, alternately, dolts and sinister and treacherous military geni. The fact they're (of course) ultimately defeated by the allied nations only adds to the whiff of xenophobia.

Battalion Wars 2 was one of the games announced alongside Nintendo's Wii, and its clear graphical style and promise of strategic depth have earned it much attention since. Sadly, hopes that it would be the console's *Advance Wars* have been dashed: it's not worthy of the comparison beyond a superficial level.

It's by no means awful, however. The controls are well implemented, and directing your units, changing between them, and



The graphics are basic technically, but the levels do have moments of design flair that make navigating their brown craters and bridges somewhat more appealing



The level of freedom in using the Wii Remote to control the camera is welcome, and makes directing your troops a breeze. If only there was more scope for that movement

generally making your battalion do what you want it to do is commendably easy. The use of the Remote to look around while moving is handled well, and even the fiddly tilting required for some of the airborne vehicles is workable after persistence.

In terms of those units, though, the campaign map dictates what is under your command or able to be freed at any time (rather than allowing some degree of choice in how to approach a situation), and it means that any potentially thorny sections are already prepared for by the game allocating you beforehand exactly the units required to win the day. This is not an issue in multiplayer, of course, but in a straight fight the emphasis on automatic respawning from captured facilities results in more of a war of attrition than a tactical engagement – the 'capture' gametype works far better, and can be a pleasure to play. It is mystifying, however, that the game offers the option for co-op play, but not over any of the campaign missions – several of which seem to have been designed with alternate routes for just such a purpose.

BW2's singleplayer campaign is very slow to get started, thanks primarily to the fact that in the earlier stages tuition is spread out languidly at the expense of challenge. You won't even be introduced to the full range of units that can be commanded until some

way through the second chapter of the campaign, by which time you'll have spent around an hour playing through missions that offer no resistance. This is the great flaw in *BW2*, and it's not addressed until very late in the game: the combat and strategy involved are shallow. Achieving almost any objective is a case of moving your army along a linear route and clicking on enemy units as they approach, whereupon they'll be smashed and you can continue your relentless forward march. Objectives, such as capturing an enemy base, are even easier to accomplish through simply pointing your army in the right direction and setting some grunts to work. In short, *BW2* is a game that will be played on autopilot. It offers an improved challenge in the later stages, but only perhaps the final three, by which time 90 per cent of the game is complete.

Ultimately, *BW2* is a strategy game that doesn't demand much strategy. That doesn't mean it's not sometimes enjoyable, but it's nothing more than an occasional diversion – and in the final analysis rather limited. [5]



FINAL FANTASY XII: REVENANT WINGS

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

What do you do with your time after you've saved the world? It's a question Square Enix is having to ask its *Final Fantasy* characters regularly now the company has decided to begin releasing direct sequels to the previously one-off world-saving adventures in its flagship series. But finding a *raison d'être* for Vaan, Penelo and the rest of the sky pirates hasn't been the only challenge for the company. By choosing to release *Final Fantasy XII*'s direct sequel on Nintendo's small-screened hardware there's also been the question of whether to shrink down its awesome scope and labyrinthine intricacy or try something different.

In a sense, the company has hedged its bets. With a basic battle system, simplified gambits and dialogue delivered with Reduced Shakespeare Company-esque brevity, this is *Final Fantasy XII Lite*. But, with some stabs into the realtime strategy genre that might be uneasy but build and improve upon the core control system of recent cousin *Heroes Of Mana*, it also has a rhythm and personality that's very much its own.

Vaan and the team operate out of a stolen airship hub and must be deployed into various locations to explore, seek treasure and battle monsters. It's at this point that the game slips into its much-publicised and unique take on the RTS. Each team member falls into one of the game's three standard unit types – melee, air or ranged – and from this standard rock-paper-scissors relationship battles are weighted one way or the other. Each leader is automatically assigned a handful of back-up troops (up to a maximum



The game sets 2D sprites over 3D environments in a style very similar to that of Square's PS1 *Saga Frontier* games



of 25 onscreen units) and with simple, fluid movements of the stylus you select groups and send them off around the isometric 3D environments. When a squad gets within a certain range of an enemy they will automatically begin attacking and randomly deploying the solitary gambit you've selected for each leader.

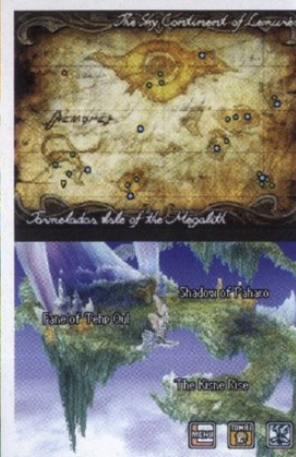
Though these mechanics are standard (if simplified) RTS fare, the game never really feels like a true member of the genre. While you do mine for materials and take over the odd structure, there is no underlying base-building strategy, your army instead moving cloud-like around the maps, clearing enemies group by group. The small screen size and tiny sprites conspire to make micromanaging a near impossibility, and instead you'll resort to moving everyone en masse, inelegantly steamrolling hapless foes. The solid presentation and well-adjusted linear flow of the game make it simple, if mindless, fun – nowhere near as compelling or brave as its elder brother but also not something to outright dismiss. So, to turn the question back on the player: what do you do with your time once you've saved the world? [6]



Balthier

A little something to welcome you to our humble profession.

REVIEW



The light-hearted tone and foray into new gameplay territory is reminiscent of *Final Fantasy X2*. Both *X2* and *Revenant Wings* were overseen by Motomu Toriyama, the director of the forthcoming *FFXIII*



The decision to allow each character to equip only one special skill at any one time is inexplicable. This dumbs down the battle system, making fights more predictable and less interesting than they might otherwise have been

Boys to men



Perhaps because Vaan, despite being the *Revenant Wings* protagonist, played only a bit part in the original drama, tagging along for the adventure while the older characters drove the narrative, here the story feels more substantial than just a shallow postscript. With his experiences in the first game under his belt, here he's free to be his own person, even if his youthful kleptomaniacal tendencies (he steals an airship in one of the early chapters) remain. The story benefits from a good localisation that, while somewhat lacking in pizzazz and character, does a decent job of broadening and deepening the universe's mythology.



RESIDENT EVIL: THE UMBRELLA CHRONICLES

FORMAT: WII RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E176

Fileshare

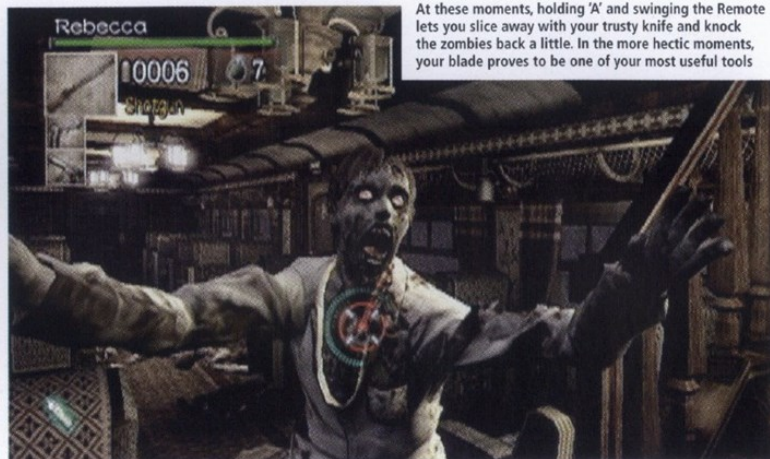


The Umbrella Chronicles is nothing if not a piece of dedicated fan service. What will ensure sales regardless of the game's quality is the abundance of files sprinkled around the levels, usually revealed by destroying pieces of scenery. They add to *Resident Evil*'s increasingly convoluted backstory and place Wesker right at the centre of the unfolding plot – a movement that was begun with the Dreamcast's *Resident Evil: Code Veronica* and has continued through his cameo appearances in *Resident Evil Zero* and *Resident Evil 4*. The most amusing thing is watching Capcom desperately trying to explain away his premature death in the very first game, an appropriate coup de grace at the time that's turned out to be quite the albatross.



The *Resident Evil* series doesn't have a great track record with lightgun games, the *Survivor* offshoots being little more than poor trundles wedded to a setting reminiscent of, but not directly connected to, the ongoing series. *The Umbrella Chronicles* aims to offer a more competent shooting experience set within the earlier games of the series, both expanding and concluding a particular story arc that has always been in the background: the fall of Umbrella.

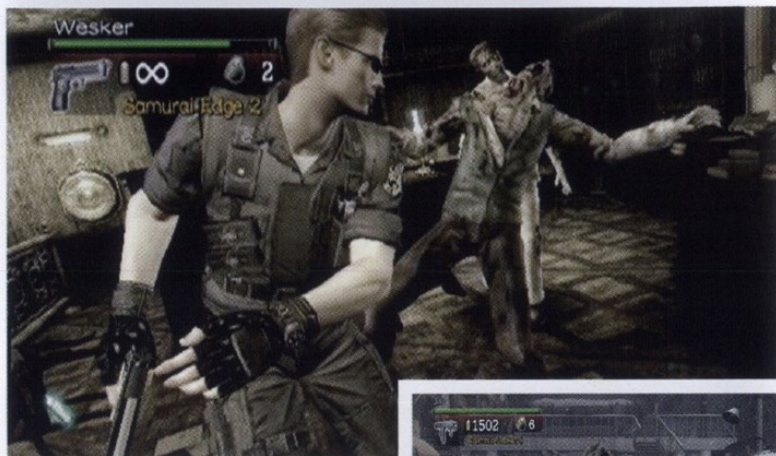
Because of this, *RE2*, *RE4* and *RE: Code Veronica* are not featured, the emphasis being on the incidents and fallout from the Arklay Mansion and Raccoon City storylines. The game begins with *RE Zero*, offering truncated versions of particular settings from that game, bookended by expository cutscenes and full of information files that can be picked up for backstory (see 'Fileshare'), and continues in much the same manner through the stories of *Resident Evil 1* and *3*, before ending with a new storyline centred on Chris, Jill and Albert Wesker. In terms of the storyline, the game's a love letter to fans, with hints and mysteries from the series explained and dispelled, new information filling in blanks you never knew were there, and all loose ends generally tied up. So far, so expected.



At these moments, holding 'A' and swinging the Remote lets you slice away with your trusty knife and knock the zombies back a little. In the more hectic moments, your blade proves to be one of your most useful tools



The interiors of some of the locations are instantly recognisable reworkings of classic moments from the earlier games – and there are more than a few direct tributes to particular enemy highlights spread throughout



There are eight playable characters throughout the game, though there are no discernable differences between them apart from during the infrequent thirdperson counterattacks

Those zombie flavourings aside, though, *The Umbrella Chronicles* stands up surprisingly well as a simple shooter. The controls work as simply and efficiently as they should, with QTE moments of shakes and single button-presses, and easy navigation through weapons. The faults that do exist, minor though they are, come from design. The impact of your handgun never feels weighty, and lining up headshots is particularly difficult (though always worthwhile to see a zombie head flopping uselessly from the neck). The window of opportunity for destroying a location's scenery, essential for finding items, also seems cruelly small on the occasions when a specific file is being hunted down. And the



bosses prove to be relatively simple to take out after their too-familiar attack patterns become clear, while having your companion shouting 'Hit their weak point!' is as cringeworthy as some of *RE1*'s dialogue.

Visually the game is a more than solid effort, and the atmospheric locations and grisly enemies are particularly praiseworthy in the context of other thirdparty Wii efforts. The camerawork throughout is excellent, and goes some way to solving one of the main conceptual problems associated with *Resident Evil* gun games: that is, somehow grafting a tense horror atmosphere to the immediate gory thrills and threats necessary for the shooting experience. And in terms of atmosphere, special mention must be made of the voice-acting in one particular scenario involving Hunk: so often the bane of the series, here it provides some dramatic moments as his radio intercepts a number of desperate pleas from those trying to survive in the midst of the zombie plague, including his dying teammates.

The Umbrella Chronicles will inevitably attract attention for its roots above all other considerations, but it's a good game on its own terms, bringing together distinct genres and making it all work. It's not an essential title, but its atmosphere and one or two moments that wouldn't have worked in any other context make it a fine adjunct to the main series.

[7]



TIME CRISIS 4

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO DEVELOPER: NEX ENTERTAINMENT
PREVIOUSLY IN: E182



Time Crisis 4 does offer a good deal of throwaway minigames with target shooting and the like, which are mildly diverting and can be played with a friend. Miserably, the twoplayer mode for the main game runs in splitscreen

Time *Crisis 4* is a big disappointment in several ways – frustratingly so, because at moments it shows glimpses of the bullet-ridden thrills of its predecessors. The PlayStation 3 outing is a particularly painful letdown because, while the arcade version of the game (included here in its entirety) is not without serious flaws, this interpretation exacerbates those that exist and throws in significant new ones.



What isn't shown here is the plastic-mounted set of LEDs that must be placed on top of your panel and plugged into your PS3 to make the lurid orange Guncon-3 work. And on that topic, a lightgun with six buttons and two analogue sticks surely misses the point of its own existence

The major problem is the new 'Complete Mission' which comes alongside the arcade version. It rejigs and adds many new levels, which sounds like a good deal but falls over in practice. Namco has decided that it was necessary to jump genres, so what you get are the arcade stages interspersed with FPS levels that have to be controlled with dual analogue sticks mounted on the Guncon-3. Unfortunately, these prove to be badly implemented, frequently infuriating, and, of course, not in keeping with the spirit of *Time Crisis*, requiring the use of controls spread all over the Guncon-3 (as opposed to two – duck and fire). And who thought it a good idea to not allow the player to be able to duck out from behind cover? These sections aren't even forgivably brief, with several tedious levels and bosses.

The arcade game itself is a welcome relief, throwing up plenty of thrilling pursuits and face-offs with ever-more-ludicrous bad guys. The new threat of insect swarms at various stages is badly judged and does somewhat dull the momentum, but overall it's a fun if forgettable blast. If you're only looking for that brief thrill you're better off at an arcade. As a package, *Time Crisis 4* is a lesson in why more isn't always better. [5]



GHOST SQUAD

FORMAT: WII RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US), JANUARY 25 (UK)
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: AM2



After a few successful runs, enemies begin wearing armour and become quicker on the trigger. Headshots or a good shredding with a shotgun are required

How long does a game have to be to represent value for money? At barely 25 minutes from start to finish, *Ghost Squad* is one of the briefest challenges on Wii. A fairly accurate conversion of Sega's arcade lightgun title, it's easy enough to allow a 'completion' on the very first run-through, but its reward system offers a fresh incentive to replay after every ending. While many players will tire of the game long before its last secrets are handed out, its simplicity makes it a strangely compelling experience.

In this shooting gallery, in which targets pop up in the same places each time, there are three missions, played consecutively, with multiple routes through each one. Since the difficulty level increases whenever the ending



screen is displayed, better accuracy is required and less time is allowed.

Bonus awards range from the practical, such as satisfyingly meaty new guns, to the downright bizarre – replacing the enemy terrorists with bikini-clad girls and weapons with fruit. You never know what you're going to get next, and finding out is a fun way to spend 25 minutes.

The Remote can be calibrated to remove the targeting reticule, offering surprisingly good accuracy and a more authentic arcade experience, so long as you remain at a fixed distance from the screen. A couple of minigames show off the game's precision, particularly when used with the bundled Zapper peripheral, and online leaderboards add more replay value.

And, although the sight of the same enemies jumping out from behind the same trees at the same point in the game may grow tiresome by the 15th or 20th time, somehow it's an altogether different experience if you know that, next time, they might be wearing panda suits. [6]



Each mission has a few scenes to slow the relentless pace of the shooting, such as this timed sniper challenge. There are also bomb-disposal scenes and three extra-tough bosses



ALIEN VS PREDATOR REQUIEM

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: VIVENDI DEVELOPER: REBELLION
PREVIOUSLY IN: £183



Technically sound, the nuts and bolts at the game's core are solid – giving the nagging feeling that the stage has been set for a much grander experience to unfold than the development time allowed for

Assuming the role of Predator turned janitor, you're tasked here with mopping up Alien debris and dissolving deceased face-huggers – and, unfortunately, little else of any note. Hardly surprising given *Requiem's* short gestation period.

In Rebellion's defence, the game is technically accomplished, and one of the more forgiving examples of thirdperson action on the PSP – with a generous lock-on which stays steadfast and true, even when the camera won't. There are glimpses of promise, too, chief among which are some excellent locales that, along with your

range of equipment and abilities, hint towards what could have been a genuinely atmospheric game of hunter and hunted.

It doesn't quite transpire that way, of course. What little there is of interest in terms of mechanics – like your range of visors, or cloaking ability – are never used in any meaningful way, other than highlighting objects and enemies in the game's otherwise barren corridors, or avoiding unwanted attention.

Likewise, the game's unique honour system (requiring you to tag and then kill enemies in exchange for upgrades) proves largely irrelevant, and in the heat of battle, toggling your firstperson view and wrestling with the analogue nub to track fast-moving targets proves frustrating and unwieldy. For those with the patience, maximising your honour potential in each stage is only possible with foresight through repeated failure, or being meticulous to the point where you're tentatively peeking around every corner or straddling doorways, retreating and re-entering areas as many times as it takes to 'get it right'.

It's a fussiness which is confounded further by the game's miserly stock of vitality, and a checkpoint system which, cruelly, memorises any damage taken. In a game where you feel you're already being cautious enough, this ensures you're constantly on edge – for all the wrong reasons. [5]



As well as the Predator's hi-tech weaponry, you also have access to his famous cloaking device, along with three separate visors – all of which become largely redundant since the levels rarely make it necessary to use them



ENDLESS OCEAN

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: £20 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: ARIKA PREVIOUSLY IN: £179



Endless Ocean is one of the Wii's stronger visual offerings. While the water has a satisfying shimmer, it's the quality of the light filtering through it that most impresses – a murky attractiveness that will darken into a hint of menace as you dive deeper



Opening on your yacht, the good ship Gabbiano, bobbing gently on a dreamy lagoon, it's a sad testimony of our hectic times that the lack of a subsequent pirate, terrorist or zombie boarding party leaves us confused as to whether or not we are indeed playing a game. After months of shootouts and excitable gambols through space, Arika's diving simulator is much-needed gaming detox.

As with any cleansing process, the first few steps are always the toughest. Initial dips into the Manaurai Sea are a baffling mix of beautifully simple mechanics and over-enthusiastic handholding. While diving ease excites a desire to explore – your diver is fluidly drawn towards the Remote pointer – the constant crackle of the tutorial radio leashes you to the yacht.

It's also odd that many of the game's most intriguing features are so slowly drip-fed to you, as if Arika fears that the simultaneous arrival of dolphins and a penlight may be a tad

too much for the Touch Generation. As such, it's not until a few hours in that *Endless Ocean* reveals what a generous approach it has to Wii functionality. Online dives with a fellow Wii owner, MP3 playback, a Nintendolphin pet – these are features to shout about, and yet here they are, modestly hidden as story bookmarks.

As functionality unfolds, so does the ocean. Playing fast and loose with geological truths, features that should not coexist side by side morph here into fascinating alien structures – a whistle-stop tour of the world's most intriguing natural architecture. While the huge library of marine life to discover will no doubt appease those of a catch 'em all mentality, it's in these deep-sea crevices and startling white lime caves that *Endless Ocean* is at its most refreshing.

Far from bloated battlefields, Arika reminds us that so little of our gaming relaxation time is actually spent relaxing, making this a healthy diversion that deserves recognition. [7]



The pen tool gets round the lack of voice chat by allowing you to doodle directions for your partner (or scar the seabed with obscene graffiti)



CONTRA 4

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK, JAPAN)
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: WAYFORWARD TECHNOLOGIES

Contra 4's a bit of a joke. The kind of masculine joke that your uncle makes at a wedding, before punching you slightly too hard on the arm, ruffling your hair and then disappearing to leer at the bridesmaids. Despite all that, he's still part of the family, and you've got to love him. In small doses.

This isn't strictly a remake of the earlier *Contra* games, but a tribute, relying on power-ups, enemies and attack patterns that will be instantly familiar to fans. It's also very difficult on the normal setting, and reaches inhuman levels of frustration on hard (which, when selected, taunts you with the text 'Think you're the master of 2D shooters? Not any more you're not'). It's a game that depends on multiple playthroughs to learn attack patterns, enemy entry points, hidden gun emplacement locations, and which power-ups you should save. If all that sounds like fun, then, allied to the generous additional content (including the original NES *Contra* and *Super Contra*), *Contra 4* is the equivalent of a free bar.

It's so old-school, though, that it's sometimes to its detriment. Is there any need, on vertically scrolling levels, for your character to die when they touch the bottom of the screen, despite the fact you know there are



As well as the visuals, several moments in *Contra 4* are direct tributes to the earlier games, with a particularly inspired 'boss wall' in the first level

platforms there? Do bosses have to seem impossible, and then prove tedious when their patterns have been learned? It could be argued that those criticisms entirely miss the point of *Contra*, but *Contra*, if it's not to become a curious relic, needs its basic formula – which can still provide furious and fantastic moments – to be tweaked infinitesimally, and less of a slavish homage to its predecessors. [6]



Whoops, there goes the mercenary on the left. The break between screens is occasionally an irritation when enemies are firing above you, but a new grapple lets you ascend fairly rapidly on most levels



FRONT MISSION

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Pilots gain experience with each use of a weapon type, encouraging you to slot pilots and Wanzers into specific offensive and defensive roles from an early stage. A shame, then, that the interface is so clunky



The *Front Mission* series has enjoyed only the most muted success outside of Japan. Despite this, Square Enix's mech-themed military strategy RPG games have a devoted following of western fans, one group of whom translated the original Japanese-only SNES game and released a patch themselves. Perhaps it's thanks to this kind of niche dedication that the company has seen fit to bring its own version of the first game to western DS users, adding in some updated visuals and a head-to-head multiplayer mode.

By today's genre standards these mechanics are unwaveringly simple. Each round, units (walking tanks dubbed 'Wanzers') are given a two-stage turn in which to travel across the grid-based environment and perform an offensive or defensive move. There are no team combination attacks, status effects or other such genre complexities: this is a straightforward war of statistical attrition that's indicative of the game's age.

Squad variety is introduced via Wanzers parts. Every section of the machine can be tailored and in this way you are given freedom to construct your strategy, for example by emphasising rocket-based ranged attacks over close-quarters physical warfare. The game encourages you

to get stuck in with customising the machines from the off, but the tiny text and fussy menus are counterintuitive. Indeed, it becomes something of an ironic relief to find yourself back out in the battlefield after each narrative interlude.

Fortunately, the range of interesting characters and the personality they bring lifts the experience considerably. The narrative moves along just fast enough to maintain interest, but this is a game best enjoyed in small doses. Unlike PSP competitors *Final Fantasy Tactics* and *Disgaea*, this game lacks the colour and complication to really drag players into the depths of its strategy, and as such can only be recommended to those who have mined those richer sources first. [6]



The game includes characters from and links to the most recent titles in the series as well as an all-new second storyline allowing players to view the conflict from the other side for the first time



RAYMAN RAVING RABBIDS 2

FORMAT: DS, Wii RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



The Mad Dog McCree-style shooting game is back, this time with video backgrounds on which the Rabbids are superimposed. In multiplayer it's impossible to tell who's shot what, however

tilting of the Remote to get the spit-ball swaying over the cup. While mostly inane, the game sometimes takes you aback with gleeful violence towards its cast – a minigame in which you frantically scrub underwear in a river ends with the loser apparently expiring and floating downstream, while victory in one campaign sees you dance triumphantly on a stack of tyres as your competitor gets repeatedly run down by cars in the background.

Regardless of their presentational charms, however, all the games, even the good ones, outlast their welcome. *WarioWare* succeeded by masking its simplicity with rapid-fire anarchy, and, in keeping the games so short, working out the control scheme became part of the fun; *Rabbids* does a far poorer job of explaining the mechanism behind each game, and too much time is spent squinting at the instructions on screen. No doubt *Raving Rabbids 2* will be successful enough, but, as Nintendo has proved, casual games should never be left to casual design. [6]



While the Rabbids are often endearingly gross, some of the squawking noises they make seem to be tuned to the resonant frequency of the human skull, and are particularly grating when looped



MARIO & SONIC AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES

FORMAT: Wii RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E181



Archery offers one of the most interesting individual mechanics in the game, requiring you to align two reticules for the Nunchuk and Remote, and account for wind speed

It's the kind of concept you suspect was conceived more by the desire to 'leverage brand synergy' than to create a classic videogame. And, for the first hour or two, *Mario & Sonic* does little to tear down those preconceptions: the selection of minigames available upon initial view is fairly trite. Perhaps these early games are intended to serve as an introduction to later, more interesting events which combine and temper the basic mechanics, but these locked challenges don't require such an insipid preamble, and it's a mistake to prevent the player from choosing their level of play from the outset. It's also difficult to see why you'd go back to the sprint event – just a matter of rapidly pumping Remote and Nunchuk – when the 400 metres event requires you to carefully moderate your speed, observing your stamina gauge and tactically using boosts.

The game has other problems in the form of surprisingly long loading times, and an interface design that forces you to click through multiple screens before starting or restarting an event, and wait out unskippable award ceremonies. Controls, while generally consistent throughout, are occasionally counterintuitive and instructions are laboriously presented, and occasionally

poor; the description for breast-stroke is incorrectly worded, for example, and the illustrative animation is no help since it displays only front crawl.

Once the full range of challenges unlocks, there are events with depth and dynamism to choose from, the enjoyment of which may well outlast the likes of more frivolous titles like *Raving Rabbids 2*. To get there, however, the game forces you along a cruelly banal route, and the inconsistency of its offering and the clunking interface tarnish those minigames that show real promise. [6]



The Dream Race is essentially a pedestrian version of *Mario Kart*, and shows that the team behind *Mario & Sonic* have skills better suited to the fantasy end of the sporting spectrum



ORCS & ELVES

FORMAT: DS (VERSION TESTED), MOBILE RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: ID SOFTWARE

With the re-release of so many classic titles on Live Arcade, it's rarely been more clear that nostalgia alone isn't a strong enough motivator to revisit games that have since been outclassed. With *Orcs & Elves*, a game from the makers of *Doom RPG*, there is no hallowed source material or fond memories to prop up its anachronistic gameplay.

Taking *Dungeon Master* as its inspiration, *Orcs & Elves* is a turn-based trudge through poorly textured labyrinths, checking off the clichés of early fantasy RPGs with a tongue-in-cheek joviality that the player almost manages to share. The earliest of these games were often clumsy to control and featured incompetently rendered art – back then such things were a necessary compromise. Today, id has little excuse for the clunky interface or the primitive daubings that represent the bestiary of King Brahm's underground realm.

As the game progresses, combat begins to demand a little more strategy, and you must stockpile potions that allow you to strike twice in one turn, or absorb health as you deal damage. Different combatants take more damage from different weapons, and some are best taken out at range. By and large, however, the tactical options available to you aren't sufficiently interesting – combat amounts to an exchange of single-frame attack animations, punctuated



Your map and inventory of potions are accessible separately through the lower screen's toolbar, which means that you have to manually swap back and forth between them, over and over

by an unnecessarily cumbersome excavation of the inventory system.

Your talking magic wand attempts the occasional joke, some of which are genuinely funny, but on the whole the bland fantasy satire does little to distinguish itself. The game is completely functional within its very limited ambitions, but playing it instills a completely neutral response, as though it were no more than a means of absorbing time. Handheld games have long since proved themselves capable of loftier achievements. [4]



Periodically, you will need to pay a visit to Gaya, the mountain's imperious dragon and arms dealer. The bartering system allows you to shave a few gold coins off her asking price



SOCOM US NAVY SEALs TACTICAL STRIKE

FORMAT: PSP RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE/SCEA DEVELOPER: SLANT SIX GAMES



For a *SOCOM* game with a story following the kidnapping of a US ambassador, it's actually very nationalistically catholic, allowing players to play as special forces from nine countries, each with their own voice tracks and squad appearances

It's rare to see environments as well rendered on the PSP as those found in *Tactical Strike*. Set in Panama, they're varied and evocative – raids on dustbowl industrial compounds at noon, rural villages at dusk, mansion complexes by night – and they're usually open. Your four-man team will have a selection of objectives scattered over the map, and it's usually wise to cover the ground extensively so as not to get surprised by enemies.

After all, it's not good to be surprised in *Tactical Strike*. Developer Slant Six has looked to *Full Spectrum Warrior* for inspiration: control of the team, which can be split into two squads of two, is restricted to basics such as moving to specified locations and firing on targets. The player's role, therefore, is strategic, primarily concerned with creating covering firezones: just as enemies will drop after a few well-placed shots, so will your soldiers.



Environments are littered with cover, including comforting crates and barrels, hay bales and cars, the latter actually being rather dangerous – under even light gunfire they tend to explode

The controls are well designed, with no hand-cramping button combinations, but not intended for reactive play: get into a panicked situation and chaos quickly descends. But the main frustration is the camera, which will often require you to move your men in order to see what you need to, and flicking between teams often results in it pointing in a disorientating direction.

There's a lot of action on offer – at around 45 minutes each, the 11 story missions are perhaps overextended for handheld play, but the game includes many more 'instant action' missions and fully featured online multiplayer, backed up by a multitude of weapons and equipment to suit different strategies. But it quickly feels samey. Squad members can be trained with experience points but the effects aren't particularly obvious. It's too easy to exploit the enemy AI, through sniping, for instance: enemies will run to where fellow foes were killed, ready to be sniped themselves. And the feeling of tactical openness is compromised by the fact that events are usually closely scripted, although it's more organic than the logical abstractions that *Full Spectrum Warrior* devolved into.

It shows that a lot of investment has been put into the game: apart from being an excellent reminder of its host's graphical oomph, *Tactical Strike* is engrossingly detailed and generous, if not wide, in scope. [7]



TIME EXTEND

STUBBS THE ZOMBIE: REBEL WITHOUT A PULSE

FORMAT: MAC, PC, XBOX
PUBLISHER: THQ/ASPYR
DEVELOPER: WIDELOAD GAMES
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: 2005



TIME EXTEND



This rebel's cause: to revive a moribund genre by bringing a dead man back to life. But what did Wideload Games' zom-com actually achieve?



Alexander Seropian, president of Wideload Games, is living proof that rebellion is the ultimate product of experience. The more you learn, the more you'll ask. The more you build, the more you'll want undone. The more you impose order on the bits and pieces of your profession, the more you'll relish chaos. And Seropian had learned and built so much when he fell in love with zombies.

There was Bungie, the studio (and

dangerous experiment. A deliberate breakdown of natural law. "When dead men start crawling from their graves and gobbling the flesh of the living," remarked Seropian in one interview, "you have to consider the possibility that everything you knew is worthless."

Ostensibly, of course, it's little more than a game about coping with the enormous bother of being recently undead. In action terms, having your guns, bombs and superhuman powers

It's about the right to bear arms, just so long as they're torn from the shoulder. About bowling your head when all about you are losing theirs

community) he'd started, sold and left behind. There was Wideload, which he founded in 2003. There was *Halo: Combat Evolved*, the heroic FPS which saved, among other things, the reputation of Xbox. There were console games and computer games. Strategies and shooters. Acolytes and awards. All the things a development CV could want. All leading to *Stubbs*.

The highest of many concepts tossed around Wideload's tiny staff – only 11 worked there then, only 20 do now – *Stubbs The Zombie* is a precious rarity: a use of power for something other than consolidating power. It's a brave twist on a rigid genre. A

replaced by guts, bowels and suffocating flatulence. It's about exercising the right to bear arms, just so long as they're torn from the shoulder. About bowling your head when all about you are losing theirs. About getting an army of halfwits, with a shove here and a wolf-whistle there, to do the job of one capable man.

But at heart it's about something more subversive than a simple change of tools. It's about learning to lose – and love it. Enter Edward 'Stubbs' Stubblefield, a guy who thought the ideal time to be a travelling salesman was in the midst of the Great



IPOD SHUFFLE

Stubbs' licensed soundtrack remains one of few to avoid the usual pitfalls of cultural irrelevance and shameless promotion. Published by Shout! Factory, it fills Punchbowl's airwaves with influential '50s hits, revisited by acts such as Cake, The Dandy Warhols and The Flaming Lips. It's also one of the most attractively presented soundtracks outside of a Japanese release, filled not with screenshots, but with bespoke line-art, illustrated artist profiles and a faux-vinyl disc. A shame, then, that the game heavily recycles the tunes for its Bemani-style dance-offs and frontend, slightly overplaying the selection.



Depression. Who couldn't even die correctly, but can at least smoke a cigarette without it ever going out. He's a pitiful creature, with a shotgun wound for a waist but, like Master Chief, blessed with an unerring sense of purpose. Not a mission, maybe, but an impulse, to eat brains, put one foot in front of the other, and give some flowers to the love of his former life – the buxom farmhand whose affections got him murdered in the first place.

Before you even get to his main objective – sacking Punchbowl, the retro-futuristic metropolis built upon his grave – *Stubbs* himself is a challenge. Which is, of course, the idea. He's unfashionable, and not just



Seldom does a klutz like *Stubbs* influence so much of the game around him. It's very much a case of zombie by name, zombie by nature

because his '30s attire is in similar condition to his flesh. He's uncomfortable, neither lithe assassin nor tactile warrior. He's not a bully, like *Dead Rising*'s Frank West. Nor is he the classic mutant, whose afflictions grant an inexplicable military knowhow. He's a loser. A victim. The guy on the other end of the joke.

For the story of a man who cannot speak, *Stubbs* features a remarkable 12,000 lines of recorded dialogue, all played for laughs, many reserved for when you cock something up. The

best thing about his possessive hand, for instance, which seizes control of gun-toting enemies, is when it plops from the sky after a botched attack and is accused, by one of Punchbowl's simpler folk, of being a communist.

Heroes with flaws are nothing new to gaming: Lucasarts, during its '90s heyday, built a reputation on them; Capcom, in a slightly different manner, likes to mix innate clumsiness with airs of sophistication (*PN03*, for example). But seldom does a klutz like *Stubbs* manage to influence so much of the game around him. True to its premise from top to toe, his is very much a case of zombie by name, zombie by nature.

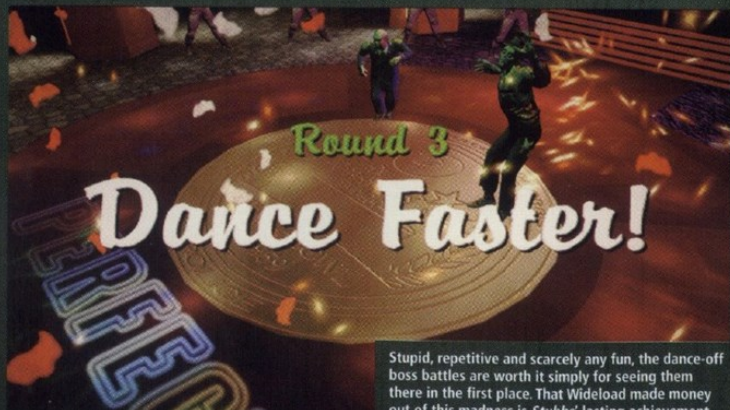
He gets from A to B with help from almost no signposting whatsoever, and from level to level by means of some truly preposterous acts of God. Freak explosions send him flying over locked gates; an ill-fated sheep gives him a ride to Punchbowl's factory district where, in the absence of a nearby toilet, he 'contaminates' the city's entire water supply. It's a delightful antidote to games like *Black*, where every lapse in logic requires one daft pretext or another. In a genre where shambolic narrative innards are commonplace, here's one

which leaves them hanging out for all to see. According to writer Matt Soell, *Stubbs'* origins lie in the fateful creep of Poe's *The Masque Of The Red Death*. To its credit, there's a lyrical momentum which sustains this game's pace, even when every corner of the screen is in anarchy.

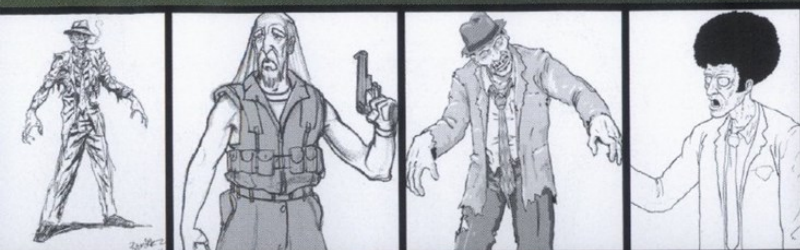
Not, perhaps, the most obvious companion to *Halo*'s relentless, stainless beat, but while it does stagger through its first few levels, *Stubbs* is dutifully similar when it finally hits its stride. It just happens to cast players more as the Flood than as Master Chief. A topsy-turvy version of that famous '30-second rule' (which at its best – the massacre at Knobb Cheese Farm, perhaps, with its bewildering lines of cornrows – is no less rewarding), it's that same quick cycle of distract-and-sneak, but with the added twist of having to recruit your friends by munching on your foes. An off-beat premise, perhaps, but in no way off-key.

A shame, then, that some people still didn't see the funny side.

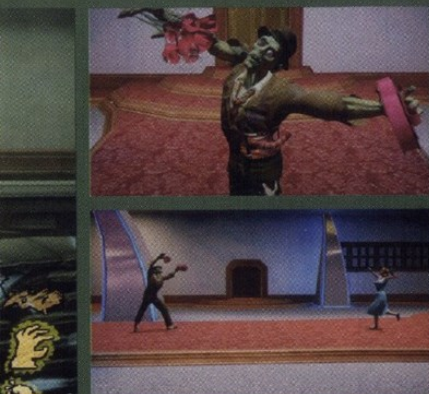
There was no marketing chicanery about *Stubbs*. From the start, it was pitched specifically to people in search of something unusual. And it found its fans – Wideload, crucially, made its money back, and speaks eagerly about a potential sequel. But it made some unlikely enemies as well. A number of posters on internet message boards, especially, by even their own often



Stupid, repetitive and scarcely any fun, the dance-off boss battles are worth it simply for seeing them there in the first place. That Wideload made money out of this madness is *Stubbs'* lasting achievement



Drawing inspiration from all corners of '50s culture, from E.C. horror comics to the geometric futurism of popular science magazines, Stubbs' art is unavoidably excellent. That it survived the normal mapping of a modified Halo engine testifies to Wideload's intense use of noise and colour filters



Incorporating one of the greatest music cues in game history (for the above scene – can you guess what it is?), Stubbs' audio design is every bit as ingenious as Halo's. Laser fire (left), for example, doesn't pulse and fizz so much as splash against its target like water

stingy standards, were particularly abusive, singling it out as one of the worst games to appear in 2005. And this wasn't criticism bashed out in random caps, with the gasping hubris of a forum troll. Nor was it posted on Amazon, two months before the game was even out. These were opinions from apparently game-literate folk, speaking from first-hand experience, damning Stubbs as if he'd violated some primal videogame law. To them, his language of moans and pratfalls wasn't endearing, it was tantamount to heresy.

And even for those who did get the joke, and appreciated the telling, Stubbs is still an easy game to dismiss for its frivolity – a rebel

with a cause, maybe, but no consequence, doomed to join *God Hand* as one of gaming's unrequited gags. But its place in history is secure. The goal of Seropian's rebellion wasn't just to have a giggle, toy with tradition and maybe make some money on the side. It was to prove that you *could* do those things. That a medium-sized budget, licensed engine (in this case, Halo's) and tiny in-house team could buy you the chance to be different – and for once get away with it.

The Wideload Model, as it's since become known, effortlessly sheared off the assumed overheads of costly modern development. By hiring contractors rather than full-time staff, it left no one on the payroll twiddling their thumbs when work ran dry. By farming asset creation out to external companies, it left others to endure the crunch, enjoying deadline extensions free of spiralling costs. Proponents today range from Warren Spector's Junction Point studio to big productions such as *Forza Motorsport*.

Impossible as it seems, as a proof-of-concept for outsourcing, Stubbs might even be one of the most daring, if not the most influential, games of its decade. Funny, given that it was never going to trouble Halo or spawn a subgenre of 'fart-and-dart' stealth-actioners. What it did instead was prove that the same three things which used to make games could, contrary to media scare-stories, still make them now. All you need is love, guts and brains.

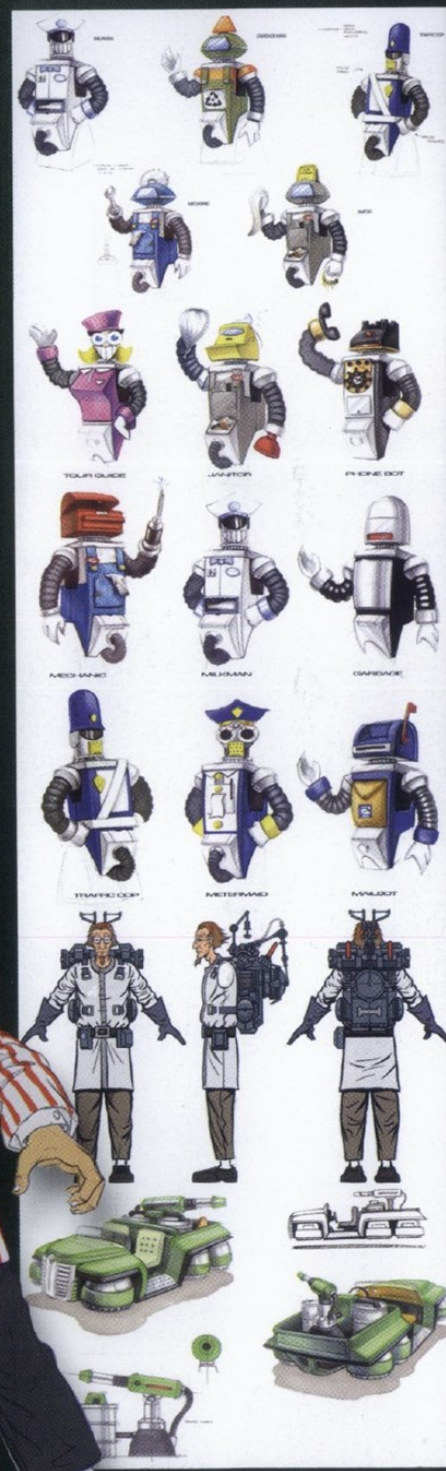
DEAD RINGERS


Depending on who you ask, Stubbs' co-op mode is either riotous fun or ruinous folly, springing a second zombie from the grave, Grubbs, who has next-to-no bearing on his partner's story. At worst, it overcrowds and sometimes breaks the game's finely balanced second half. At the very least, it proves there's a dynamic which goes beyond basic stealth play, described deservedly as Halo with a morbid twist. But it does beg the question: when cost-effectiveness is so important, why put man-hours into something so niche? Simply to prove that you can, maybe?

There's a hint of *BioShock* in the cheery inventions and naive promises of Punchbowl, which only gets stronger as Stubbs zeroes in on billionaire industrialist Andrew Monday. And the stronger it gets, the harder it becomes to take 2K's sullen shooter seriously



Stubbs' habit of decorating whole rooms with blood makes up for the number of kill animations – a mere three for when brains get chomped

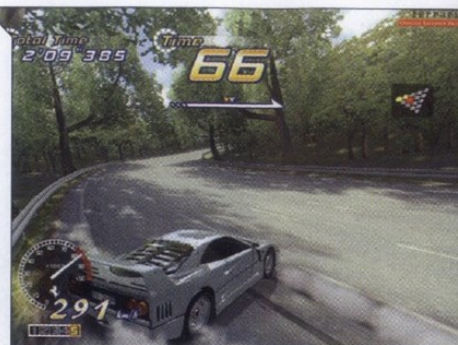




THE MAKING OF... **OUTRUN 2**

When Sega's irrepressible drift-driving festival leapt from the arcade to Xbox, such an unexpected move couldn't have felt any less at home

FORMAT: XBOX PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: SUMO DIGITAL/SEGA AM2 ORIGIN: JAPAN/UK RELEASE: 2004



Easy right, definitely. A driving game where sharp bends are no more threatening than coins in a *Mario* game? Brakes that need only ever be tapped, never slammed? Where the finish line is rarely anything more than five minutes away? There's simplistic, and then there's simple. And then there's

"We didn't know what the game was. When they started to talk about OutRun, we just about kept our enthusiasm under control"

OutRun 2, a jubilant, spontaneous, drift-a-licious sprint across a series of vivacious backdrops – the videogame equivalent of your daily dose of vitamin D – for no greater reason than the sheer satisfaction of skidding around corners at phenomenal, unrealistic speeds. It put the 'arcade' back in 'arcade racer', then put it back in the arcades.

To be this good doesn't have to

take ages – although you'd be forgiven for thinking that, given the intervening years between the 1986 original and this 'true' sequel. But it does take Sega's faith and outlook to make something like *OutRun 2*. But, to make *OutRun 2* for Xbox, it took the input and effort of Sheffield studio Sumo Digital, under Sega's steady

hand. Not to mention a surprisingly close and prevailing eye from Ferrari, the manufacturer that exclusively stocks *OutRun 2*'s showroom. But before we get to that, just how did the hitherto unknown Sumo Digital manage to hook up with Sega? Who pitched, and who fielded?

"We were invited to a meeting with Sega where they put the opportunity to us," explains

Paul Porter, technical director at Sumo. "We didn't know what the game was going to be until we got to the meeting! When they started to talk about *OutRun*, we just about managed to keep our enthusiasm under control. Apparently, Microsoft had recommended us to Sega. We had recently helped another developer by putting Xbox Live and network play into a game they were working on, at Microsoft's request. They must have been pleased with what we did. Prior to Sumo's formation, and while working for Gremlin and Infogrames, we knew some of the people at Sega, and that helped to raise their confidence that we could deliver, even though we hadn't published any games as Sumo at that time."

Warren Leigh, Sega's producer on *OutRun 2*, offers his perspective from the other side of the table: "When we first approached Sumo, they had no idea what we were thinking and yet were excited to be travelling down to







Key tracks from Sega's *Scud Race* and *Daytona* were drafted in as unlockable courses, a more than pleasant surprise for those players who discovered them. "This was due to the massive demand Sega receives, almost daily, requesting a new version of those games," says Lycett



TUNE SALAD

Quiet, please. A decades-old question is about to be forever laid to rest. Which *OutRun* tune is the best? Splash Wave, Magical Sound Shower, Passing Breeze, or even Last Wave? "Magical Sound Shower – what a beautiful piece of music," offers Leigh. "The Euro remix of Magical Sound Shower is my fave," follows Gunstone, muddying matters further. "There is a reason Splash Wave is the default track, you know!" bids Lycett, adding: "For me, Last Wave is also a perfect piece of videogame music. A nice wind-down after enjoying the beautiful journey." Right. So maybe the only question we'll be able to answer is regarding which piece of music *isn't* the best? Nope. Not when Richard Jacques, Sega's right-hand music man and composer of the Euro remix tracks featured in *OutRun 2*, is yet to have his say: "Passing Breeze – always has been. It's what I remember from the arcade, when I was 13, on the pier in Devon. Classic Sega."

A SELECTION OF AUDIO TRACKS FROM THE GAME

SEGA
OutRun 2

Track 1: Magical Sound Shower (Original)
Track 2: Passing Breeze (Original)
Track 3: Splash Wave (Original)
Track 4: Magical Sound Shower Remix
Track 5: Passing Breeze Remix
Track 6: Splash Wave Remix

SUNCO

© 1988, 1993, 2004. Tracks 1-6 created by SUNCO remixed by

London for initial talks about a revamp of Sega IP. When they were told it was *OutRun* that we needed their help on, they nearly fell off their chairs in excitement. I only know this because they've told me over beers in recent years – you'd never have guessed their excitement through their cool, professional, poker faces during meetings like this. The design of the game, and its handling, were all handled by AM2, and taken largely from the arcade. Sumo had a lot of creative licence regarding the missions and Xbox Live content, and this was possibly what bonded Sega and Sumo together. Sumo has always understood what makes a Sega game, and their love shows through."

Steve Lycett, Sumo's own producer on the game, explains some of the detail behind the opening stages of the partnership: "Sega were keen to bring *OutRun 2* to home consoles, but felt it needed to have extra content to give the game some long-term replay value. We pitched originally with the addition of the mission mode and online multiplayer, as we believed we shouldn't try and change the core gameplay. We based the design on the deep mechanics that already existed. To us, *OutRun* is all about instant-fun arcade play, and I think it was our understanding of this that made Sumo the choice for Sega."

Given the difference in tech specs between platforms, the Xbox port was quite the crunch. There were sacrifices that had to be made en route, but was there a quality bar in place from the off to aim for, or did Sumo simply push to produce the best conversion possible? "Our mandate was to keep the game arcade perfect – to the point where a team of Sega testers would compare screenshots from the arcade machine and Xbox version to ensure there were no discernable differences," says the aptly named Porter. "AM2 has exceptionally high standards, which we aspired to meet. Obviously, this was quite a challenge. We compressed some textures, made use of the Xbox hard drive for caching data and reduced the environments where possible. For example, if you could position the camera behind the buildings and trackside objects you would see that it's like a movie set, with only the facade modelled."

Working on a game whose ground rules are, essentially, already in place can either be limiting or liberating. But did Sumo see it as a pleasure? "Most games don't know what they really are until alpha stage, sometimes not until after release," explains Leigh. "When working on an arcade port, you already have the fundamental gameplay, the fun factor and the entire atmosphere; the

goal is to build on that and not add anything that is below that quality bar or detracting from the essence."

So, from converting to diverting. Despite the subtlety that lurked within *OutRun 2*'s gregarious simplicity, the arcade game alone may not deliver as a full-price home console release. A lengthy mission mode was added, tasking the player with dodging convoys, toppling lines of coloured cones or even performing befuddling memory/maths tests while maintaining a cool-headed driving line. Were there any that didn't make the cut? "At one stage we had the option to choose whether you were Alberto or Clarissa as the driver, so you could be male or female," says Lycett. "We had a mission where you had to drive well enough not to lose your girlfriend or boyfriend. We had to drop this due to the massive amount of character animations it would have meant doing. The mission mode where you take photos of trackside hearts was originally going to be you taking pictures of trackside landmarks, where you'd get rated on the quality of the photos. We simplified it down in the end as it was far too complicated."

There is always an enormous level of complexity in transferring a wheel-based arcade game to a stick-based gamepad, but there's also tremendous tangible sensitivity in *OutRun 2*, buffered by the smart application of pad rumble. "This is where AM2 came back in to it," says Leigh. "It wasn't that they didn't trust Sumo, but AM2 wanted to ensure it felt as close to the arcade as possible, and got their hands dirty. It was a funny time – code came in and the production team and QA here at Sega Europe were thinking it's good, it's close, but there's something not right. We sent a version over the AM2 with all the attributes and variables editable and within days a new version came back from Sumo with AM2 input and everyone screamed a big: 'That's it! What did you change?'"

"This was something that AM2 was heavily involved with," adds **Mark Glossop**, executive producer at Sumo. "We sent builds across to





"The game provides a lot of cues if you're not going to make it around a corner," says Lycett. "The smoke generated from the wheels goes up a notch, for example." Adds Leigh: "There were a few misadventures put on signposts by AM2 that needed to be removed; artists can be a hilarious bunch"

Japan which included an editor to allow them to modify the handling whilst they played the game. They tweaked the controls and handling to make sure the home version was very faithful to the arcade. It was also interesting when we came to *Coast 2 Coast*, as each version is specifically tailored to that console's controller. Again, AM2 were instrumental to helping us capture the right control. "Did Sumo feel proud of the fact that, essentially, it was reviving an age-old approach to arcade racing for a brand new audience? "Without a doubt. When the arcade version was announced I was praying we'd see a home version. When we found out we'd secured the project I really did need to pinch myself to convince me I wasn't dreaming!" says Lycett. "It was a proud moment for everyone involved, and Sega was really buzzing around the time of release,"

"To the day I die, I'll hold my head high and say I was producer for OutRun 2! And argue with anyone who dislikes it"

remembers Leigh. "Sadly, that brand new audience wasn't as big as we thought, and I still feel *OutRun 2* is an unsung hero of a saturated genre, a gem, and true 'game'." And, just in case anyone out there feels like *OutRun 2*'s sales were just desserts, **Ben Gunstone**, senior producer on the game, has the following to offer: "*OutRun 2* is still one of the proudest moments in my career. To the day I die, I'll hold my head high and say I was producer for *OutRun 2*! And argue with anyone who dislikes it."

Aside from the synergy of Sumo and Sega, the game had a third wheel, one all too easy to dismiss as a spare tyre given how little the presence intrudes: Ferrari. But its influence runs deeper than most would expect. "Ferrari are excellent to work with," says Glossop. "We kept them informed of all the ideas we had for the game, and we rarely had any that they felt required changing. Ferrari took a close interest in the game and provided CAD data to



From left to right: Sumo's technical director and company co-founder Paul Porter; *OutRun 2*'s senior producer Ben Gunstone; Warren Leigh, the game's producer from the publisher's side; and Sumo executive producer Mark Glossop

ensure that the cars were spot on. For *Coast 2 Coast*, Ferrari even helped in the design of the extra 'OutRun' tuned versions of all the cars."

"Ferrari had a huge influence on all the *OutRun 2* games," adds Gunstone. "They are official Ferrari games. All the cars had to be re-approved for use on the Xbox version.

All usage of the Ferrari logo had to be approved. They also had say-so on missions. We couldn't do anything that was promoting dangerous driving. They made us put a seatbelt on the driver on the game boxart and made him powerslide without crossing lanes. All the items for the unlock cards came from them – they wanted to make sure the best-selling items were seen very early on. For *Coast 2 Coast*, they basically had full approval on the front-end. It was not going to look like it did without Ferrari."

OutRun 2 is seen as a certain embodiment of Sega's philosophy: blue skies, vibrant looks, a larger-than-life approach to gameplay, zero grittiness, and it's easy to imagine that it brought a twinkle to the eye of Sumo's inner fanboy. Was it a unique pleasure to be working on such a sleek, simple game? Did *OutRun 2*'s cheery outlook bring a certain kind of cheer to life at Sumo? "I think it's safe to say that *OutRun* brought some sun to Sheffield!" says Lycett. "We always enjoy working with Sega on our

projects, but I think, as it was our first major Sega title, it will always hold a special place in our hearts. As someone who purposely sought out the original *OutRun* in the arcades, it was also a dream come true to work on the game, and certainly one of my fondest Sumo periods." There you go, long-serving, hard-suffering Sega fans: chuffed to the point of sounding like the lyrics of an unwritten song for *Sonic R*'s soundtrack. "It was certainly a life-changing experience for me. I was a grumpy, sarcastic and cynical young producer at the time, and now... Well... I think Magical Sound Shower still haunts my ears, though," says Leigh, before offering the Making Of equivalent of 'See you next game!': "When life seems to be getting you down, you know that blue skies can always turn a smile."



There may have been temptations to change *OutRun 2*'s style – its characters, for instance – in order to 'better suit' a console audience, but "the only difference is – to the true hardcore fans' detriment – the covering of the blonde's cleavage," says Gunstone



COASTING

With the Xbox version underway, was the PS2 considered to also receive a conversion, given the relative numbers of console owners? Of course, the *OutRun 2* 'expansion' *Coast 2 Coast* made it to both PS2 and PSP, but was it the Xbox conversion that gave confidence? "Sega was very keen to have Live support with network multiplayer," says Porter. "In addition to this, there was concern initially from AM2 that the game could not be squeezed inside the Xbox without affecting the quality of the artwork. Given that the PS2 has half the memory of the Xbox, it was considered that a PS2 version would be too risky, given the timescale for the project. Obviously, we relished the opportunity to put *OutRun* on to PS2 when we had the chance with *Coast 2 Coast*. We had to produce a demo, showing the game running at 60fps on PS2 to AM2 before they would greenlight the project."



Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

Remote phone home

To test mobile games is to enter a spider's web of handsets and operators. Mobile Complete's DeviceAnywhere solves the problem



Faraz Syed, CEO, Mobile Complete

You know game development is getting over-complicated and somewhat desperate when publishers have to release their biggest brands over seven hardware platforms, spread from DS all the way up to PlayStation 3. When it comes to mobile game development, however, the obstacles and capabilities are different by an order of magnitude.

Indeed, it's so overwhelming even some mobile execs have problems dealing with the scale. Describing the development of the mobile version of *Transformers*, one of publisher Glu Mobile's execs reckoned the company was having to deal with 20,000 SKUs. Further investigation revealed that total was only gained by multiplying up via all the different language versions, rather than being a measure of the spectrum of devices Glu's coders had to support.

Yet it was only a couple of years ago that the CEO of mobile porting technology company Tira Wireless said there were around 350 commercially available phones. It seemed plenty. That number has since more than doubled, though, because most of those now ageing 350 devices still need to be supported, while hundreds of newer models have been added to the mix.

Of course, developers and publishers have various techniques to try to deal with the situation. Technology has a part to play with companies such as Tira continuing to offer automatic systems for reworking a game to handle the many different screensizes, chips and API specifications that bedevil the industry. Increasingly, the larger developers themselves are venturing into middleware, too, with the likes of Ideaworks3D and Big Blue Bubble offering tools to grease the wheels, in terms of developing for high-end smartphones and Java-to-BREW porting respectively.

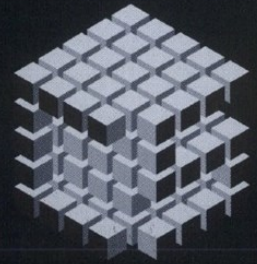
More often than not, hard graft and attention to detail remain vital. For example, no matter what other tech they're using, developers will typically create a number of reference builds – versions of their game on popular handsets that can then be used as references by the work-for-hire porting houses in low-wage countries such as India and China which fill in the gaps.

In turn, this brings its own issues. How do you get access to handsets, and more importantly when testing connected or streaming games, how do you get access to commercial networks in



The trick behind DeviceAnywhere is that phones are taken apart in such a way that they can be interacted with via a web interface, as well as being located in various locations around the world so different networks can also be tested

www.deviceanywhere.com




North America and Japan, let alone the European ones?

There is a surprisingly elegant, if slightly Heath Robinson, solution. It's called DeviceAnywhere.

"DeviceAnywhere solves the problem because we've taken apart every handset you can think of, placed them in data centres in various locations around the world and connected them to the internet," explains **Faraz Syed**, CEO of its creator, Mobile Complete.

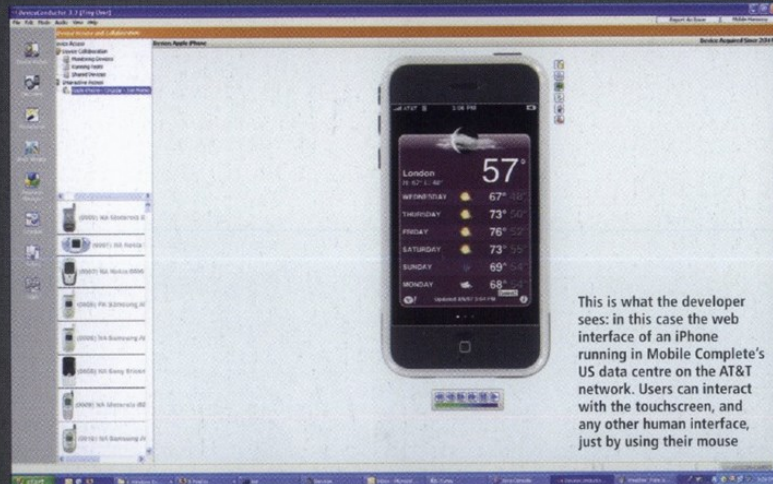
Really, it's as simple as that. The phones are disassembled with electrical connections made to any user interfaces – whether buttons, sliders, clamshell micro-switches, touchscreens or accelerometers. These are then hooked up to a web interface, which features a feed from the phone's LCD, and enables developers to take control of any phone on any operator network, using their mouse.

"Currently we've almost reached the 1,000 mark when it comes to handsets," says Syed. "We have data centres in the US, Canada, the UK and Germany. We're rolling out into France and will be in Japan, Spain and Italy in 2008. That will be the first tier of the market. Our goal is to continue to expand the DeviceAnywhere footprint across the world's major mobile markets."

 **"People come up at conferences and tell me: 'I couldn't have launched my product without your service'"**

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it's proving successful, with Syed claiming a ten-fold growth in companies subscribing to the service during the past 12 months. That includes everyone from Google, AOL, Yahoo, Disney, EA and Gameloft to operators, handset manufacturers and mobile portals. Even small companies can get with the programme.

"People come up to me at conferences and tell me: 'I couldn't have launched my product without your service'," says Syed.



"If you want to get a game or application on Verizon in the US, you have to purchase 72 handsets. That's around \$50,000 including contracts. DeviceAnywhere offers that for a few thousand dollars. We really are levelling the mobile playing field."

It's a bold claim, but with pricing for access to the service broken down into a monthly £100 subscription per operator and a fee for hourly access to handsets,

address EA Mobile and one-person shops, so we have some premium features rolling out for the large companies who demand high levels of support."

What's also interesting to pick apart are the flows of popularity between different handsets. When Apple's iPhone launched, for example, it was in high demand as companies checked their websites worked on its browser. Usage has since dropped off, although Syed says he expects to be racking up more iPhones when Apple releases its SDK in February. At present, though, the Razr remains the most numerous phone in the system, with nine iterations available.

Expansion is also being planned with a virtual version of the technology, called VirtualAnywhere, which should be available for the public to play with in early 2008 (see box, right). Developers and access to the physical hardware will remain the company's focus, however.

"In the past, people have tried to solve these problems using emulation and simulation, but if you're trying to test a consumer-facing application, the bottom line is you can't rule anything out without actually testing on the physical device," Syed states.

Mobile comes into the web

When it comes to VirtualAnywhere, Mobile Complete's consumer-facing version of DeviceAnywhere, the company has reversed its technology focus. Instead of providing access to a physical device via the internet, it will provide access to an emulation that's embedded into web pages in a similar manner to a YouTube video.

"There's no way we could expose real handsets to consumers, but they would love access to handsets in terms of playing with them and applications before they buy them," says Syed.

"That's why we've invented a technology which crawls over a handset, grabbing all the actions it can perform, and recording them. We can then make this available over the internet. We are working with operators and manufacturers, as well as media companies. For example, publishers would be able to embed a handset with a game on their websites."

Mobile Content is definitely looking to ensure its customers are making 24/7 use of its operation. Syed says the business model will scale as the company expands, too, although as a venture-funded operation there's less of a requirement for profit than growth at present.

"Our pricing is a bit lower than the market would bear, but we want to address the big guys and the little guys," he explains. "However, there's always a pricing challenge when you want to



Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

■ **NAME:** Transmission Games

■ **DATE FOUNDED:** 1996

■ **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 110

■ **KEY STAFF:** "Plenty"



■ **URL:** www.transmissiongames.com

■ **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY**

AFL Premiership 2007, Heroes Of The Pacific, Heatseeker, Brian Lara 2007 Pressure Play

■ **ABOUT THE STUDIO**

"Transmission Games has been around for over ten years and employs over 100 staff, yet you've probably never heard of us. Fair enough! Formerly JR Gurus, we got tired of being confused with an industrial relations company, so we've changed our name.

"Being off the beaten track in Melbourne has allowed us to grow in a sustainable manner, and we've become adept at recognising opportunities – from our early equestrian titles to stadium-based sports, arcade flight and now character-based action games. From the outset we've focused on developing and retaining ownership of our IPs, a practice that continues today with the sequel to *Heroes Of The Pacific*. We are developing for Xbox 360, PS3, and high-end PC.

"We recently started development of *Sin City*, based on Frank Miller's immensely popular graphic novels. *Sin City* is our first foray into character-based action titles, and utilises the Unreal 3 engine."



Heroes Of The Pacific (above and below) began with the attack on Pearl Harbor and continued through the Pacific war, taking in the battle of Midway on the way



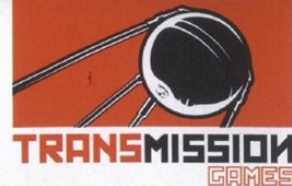
■ **LOCATION:**
Melbourne,
Australia

■ **CURRENT PROJECTS:**

A sequel to *Heroes Of The Pacific*, and a game based on Frank Miller's *Sin City*



Transmission Games has its HQ in the Australian city of Melbourne



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- Lead Script Programmer
- Lead Designer
- Senior Character Modeler
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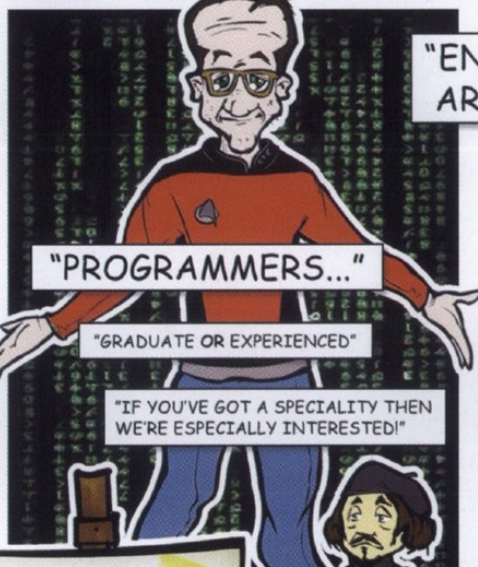
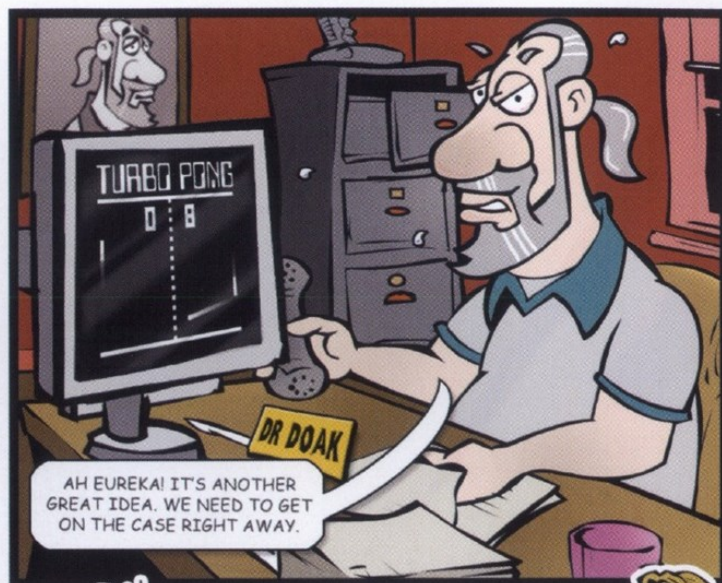
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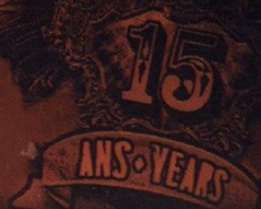


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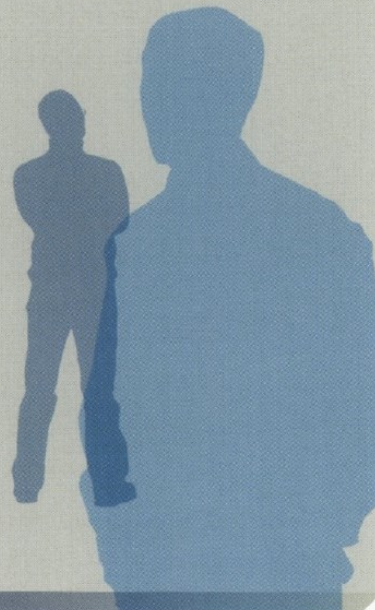


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BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

In defence of *Tower Defense*

Having entered journalism as a movie reviewer during my college days, I've always been fascinated by year-end top ten lists. There's something perversely austere about such rankings, as if an entire year of movie-going — or music listening, or book reading, or game playing — can be reduced to a list of ten. It will be interesting to see whether a single 'game of the year' emerges from the collective consensus, or whether the plethora of excellent games splinters the critical establishment. I don't know which criteria my fellow critics will use to distinguish their game of the year from all those other 2007 releases, but I've found mine: obsession.

That's what distinguishes my selection — Paul Preece's Flash game *Desktop Tower Defense* — from just about everything else I've played thus far this year. I don't mean being blown away by a game's opening, like *God Of War II*. I

cigarettes years earlier — they're just not smoking? That's how I feel about *Desktop Tower Defense* — the rhetorical danger of applying the addiction model to videogames be damned.

I shared my thoughts with a few friends who work in videogames — a couple of producers and a publicist — and they were taken aback. They generally felt that in almost any other year, my choice would be legitimate, but that to do so for this year, when console games in particular have been so strong, was more an act of provocation than anything else. (I certainly enjoy being provocative, perhaps even a bit more than the typical journalist, but that wasn't my intent.) Nor did I select this game because, as a fellow journalist and *Desktop Tower Defense* devotee asserted, short-session games like this are more perfectible than their longer brethren. (True enough, yet I hadn't felt quite the same thing

more powerful units (expensive and slow to level up) capable of grinding down the toughest foes. The way the game is poised on the razor's edge between simplicity and complexity, encouraging I-can-top-that-high-score bravado one moment and I'm-in-deep-shit despair the next. But I'm not sure that my words captured what I was trying to express: that like my favourite movie (*Taxi Driver*), novel (*Chronicle of a Death Foretold*) or TV show (season four of *The Wire*), *Desktop Tower Defense* had just simply got itself down under my skin like no other game this year.

Until, that is, I played *Rock Band* over Thanksgiving. Or more correctly, after I'd returned to New York from Los Angeles — where I'd just spent the US holiday eating, sleeping and playing *Rock Band* with the same group of friends until the crack of dawn — and felt a vaguely hollow sensation that I quickly diagnosed as a hole in my soul where my band had been. I'd been rather taken with the *Guitar Hero* games, but nothing like *Rock Band* and the way that Harmonix has combined its various elements — overdrive, fail outs, drum fills, vocal improvisation, bass grooves, unison phrases, crowd response and the big rock ending — to create the incredibly riveting simulacrum of playing in an actual rock band. As with *Desktop Tower Defense*, I felt that old, cloying grip of obsession rising once again — manifest here as a drive to 'practice' my drumming, guitar playing and singing so that I could be that much better when my band got back together — to herald the emergence of a *second* game of the year candidate. And along with it, the realisation that I had no criteria that would enable me to decide between this pair of titles: the game I can't stop playing and the game I'm afraid to start playing again.

N'Gai Croal writes about technology for Newsweek. His blog can be found at blog.newsweek.com/blogs/levelup/

I don't know which criteria other critics will use to distinguish their game of the year, but I've found mine: obsession

don't mean spending hours on multiplayer, like *Halo 3*. I don't even mean literally dreaming about a game's environments, like *BioShock*, or its mechanics, like *Portal*. No, what I mean is being so drawn into a game that I thought about it constantly, even when I wasn't playing it; that 'just one more round' became my mantra; that six weeks later I decided that I had to go cold turkey despite the gnawing sense of emptiness that not playing it brought; that even as I sit here writing this column, I'd rather refresh my memory with YouTube clips than start playing it again because I know that to start is to risk losing the next six hours of my life.

You know how some people feel like they're still smokers even though they gave up

with other darned-near-perfect small games like *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved* or *Super Stardust HD*.) So I tried to explain precisely why I'd found it so gripping. The simple charm of its hand-drawn graphics and lo-fi audio effects. The progress bar inexorably ticking across the screen warning me of the next several waves of enemies that I'd have to face. The way the intensity of the encounters evolves from allowing me thoughtful and deliberate strategising at the beginning to forcing me into frantic micromanagement to counter the overwhelming foes in its latter stages. The need for me to balance the construction of the weaker units (cheap but quick to build) necessary for longer mazes with that of the



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BY RANDY SMITH

HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

How deep is your love?

Based on what we've discussed so far, you'd think *Indigo Prophecy* (aka *Fahrenheit*) would be a favourite of mine. It has a few cutscenes, but mostly it does everything interactively, stuff that other games wouldn't touch. I mean, you can play guitar to lure your ex-girlfriend into an ill-considered, semi-mutual seduction. If that's not entertainment with relevance to my life then I don't know what is. I certainly applaud its brave forays into new topics, but the interactions are lacking. 'Whiner', you're thinking. First he wants everything to be interactive. Now he wants it to be good, too.

Quick, grab a pen! On a scale of 0 to 10, fill in the magnitude of interactivity exhibited by the following: the screen that says 'push any button to continue' after your game finishes loading ____, skating in *Tony Hawk* ____, a theoretical art installation which is basically a

situation and you'd be like 'OH, MAN' but then you'd push the right buttons at just the right times and then you'd see this awesome thing next! Boom!' It's not just *Indigo Prophecy*'s action sequences that use this style of interaction. It's also how boss monster fights conclude in *God Of War*, for example. How do you feel about those two? Is one better?

Choose Your Own Adventure books are the consummate example of an interaction structure one step up in magnitude: the branching graph. It's pissed you off in the form of dialogue trees where you wished you could type what you'd really like your character to say. And that's the major limitation; they should have been called Choose Between Several Of Someone Else's Adventures, but the marketing folks probably didn't like that. Branching graphs of various forms are really common in games; for example, early Sierra adventure games used

Music is the space between the notes, after all. Not every movie is improved by constant cuts and camera swoops until it feels like an MTV video. *Super Smash Bros* is a highly systemic game whose screen looks a lot like a Sierra adventure screen but which would not be improved by the addition of rich 3D exploration for travelling between arenas after fights. It would resolve down to a choice between arenas anyway, and you'd wish you could just pick from a menu instead.

But can you imagine if *Tony Hawk* were branching, where you watch your dude skate for a while then you get a menu for your next trick — A: Flipkick, X: Roastbeef to Lipslide Revert, etc — then your dude does that trick and skates some more? You wouldn't really feel like you were skating, would you? That's because *Tony Hawk*'s skating interaction is a legitimate game system, supporting lots of nuanced player expression, far more analogue, far less discrete than the interaction structures mentioned above. When you replay a *Tony Hawk* level for the million time, you are only getting further proof that the skateboarding experience is being created from scratch by you using your input. When you replay *Indigo Prophecy*, you realise that you have been choosing between a small handful of separate possibilities created by someone else, and the illusion of authorship evaporates.

Systems are most easily designed for physical domains: combat, movement, rhythm, the topics of videogames. We are not very accomplished at designing them for abstract and emotional topics, so we fall back on discrete interactions instead. Playing guitar for my ex in *Indigo Prophecy*, I wanted to feel like I'd created the experience myself. How do we design a system to make that possible?

Randy Smith is a lead game designer at EA's LA studio. His current project is a collaboration with Steven Spielberg

With the undead eating her kingdom you don't have time to go find the bracelet the princess dropped in the swamp

large sculpture you can walk inside and push a button to cause a red light to turn on ____, Timecode, the film from 2000 in which the screen is divided into four synchronised sections, each of which simultaneously contains interesting activity ____, any old film ____, a Choose Your Own Adventure book ____.

You don't have to be a professional to know that not all interactivity is created equal. It's only a marginal improvement that evolves 'push any button to continue' into 'push this specific button during this time window to continue, otherwise you fail'; a type of interaction I like to call 'insert game design here', as in: "I couldn't figure out exactly how it would work, but I had this cool idea that you'd be in this crazy

them to represent travel through space. You walk off the side of one screen and on to the side of another screen. In a modern 3D game, spatial exploration is a much richer experience that you feel more deeply involved with, the terrain unfolding before you in nuanced response to your input. Is one better?

The 'lock and key' is another old chestnut. Sometimes you accept it, because there's no negotiating with a giant locked gate. Other times you try to find the 'shake princess' button so you can politely explain that with the undead eating her kingdom you don't have time to go find the bracelet she dropped in the swamp.

By noting the limitations, I don't mean to imply that simple interactions are invalid.



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BY MR BIFFO

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Ring, sir?

It's fair to say that the Xbox 360 software line-up is pretty much peerless at the moment. I don't think it's necessarily the most varied portfolio of games, but it does offer the sorts of titles I want to play. By contrast, the Wii is a genius machine, but I'm starting to think that it really would've benefited from a little more graphical oomph under the bonnet. And, y'know, a few more AAA games. And as for the PlayStation 3... seriously, what the hell has happened there?! It's a balls-up of Beagle 2 proportions. Except that if Sony had been running the ill-fated Mars lander mission they'd have set up a fake blog run by someone called 'Astrodude 3000', who would post daily about what a "well wicked" success the mission had actually been, and how "phat" and "fly" Colin Pillinger is. And then, having failed to convince anyone that way, Sony would send up another, cheaper, Mars lander,

last ten days, having switched on my 360 to be confronted with the famous 'red ring of death'. This, as many of us will know, represents an unrecoverable hardware failure.

I've never had a console die on me before. I broke my SNES at one point, because I'd drunkenly tried to force a cartridge into the slot, and bent the pins, but that could hardly be blamed on Nintendo. No, that was plainly the fault of the local publican who sold me the alcohol. However, my Xbox 360 – just two years young – has died because it was clearly rather rubbishly made. Visit pretty much any online gaming forum and there'll be a thread dedicated to people whose 360 has busted. Mine had in fact started to die a year ago, when it stopped letting me get online. Over the past six months, it had developed a tendency to freeze in the middle of a game. And then, ten days ago as I type this, it died altogether, those

architecture, because having a console die on me has really sapped a lot of goodwill. I already hate PCs – I'm typing this (on a Mac) on the day that both our laptop and a desktop PC have also died, with no hope of affordable recovery (according to some fat bloke at the PC shop, anyway). Unfortunately, PCs are a necessary evil; my children need them for their homework, and to talk to paedophiles. I don't need to own a Microsoft console. I've got other, seemingly more reliable, systems to play games on.

I know Microsoft have extended the warranty on 360s, and have supposedly tweaked the hardware in recent models, but it's still pretty much inexcusable. Why should I have to go to the hassle of parcelling up and sending off a machine that should have worked indefinitely out of the box in the first place? Especially when, at this time of year, there's no guarantee I'll get it back in time for Christmas. I mean, how am I supposed to play *Call Of Duty 4*?

Unfortunately, it's clearly a by-product of the way the industry continues to function. It's that endless pressure to meet deadlines imposed by the financial year, the advice of accountants taking precedence over the wisdom of the engineers. Evidently, the Xbox 360 was rushed to market in time for Christmas 2005, because Microsoft feared the looming, then-still-threatening presence of Sony's PS3 (oh, if only they knew then what we all know now).

Of course, the 360 has built up too much of a head of steam now for this steady procession of hardware failures to do too much damage to its brand. Not when at least one of its rivals continues to sell its console with all the grace of an inbred cake salesman with a bee trapped up his vest. I just hope it's a lesson learned for the future, because Christ knows what it's costing Microsoft to make all these repairs.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television

My 360 may have done the most brilliantly filthy things in bed, but they blinded me to the fact that it was riddled with defects

except by that point nobody would even be paying attention.

Back when I used to write this stupid thing called Digitiser I'd usually avoid the question of which console people should buy. I would say stuff like: "Oh, it depends entirely on what sort of games you like, moc-moc-a-moc, stay away from my bins, do you see? Etc."

But today I have no such truck with impartiality, and if someone asked me which console they should buy I wouldn't hesitate to recommend the Xbox 360. Or the Wii if they're an old person or a girl. Or someone who just likes holding things which remind them a bit of their penis (if they have a penis). However, my Xbox-centric faith has been sorely tested in the

impatiently flashing three red lights around the power button telling me that its guts were irreversibly knackered.

I'm a bit sad, to be honest. There were clearly plenty of anti-Microsoft naysayers when the console was launched, but I always thought it was a solid, attractive-looking system, which did plenty of things right. As it turns out, the old adage about never judging a book by its cover has proved true once again: my Xbox 360 may have looked gorgeous, and it may have done the most brilliantly filthy things in bed, but they blinded me to the fact that deep down it was riddled with crippling personality defects, hewn into it from birth.

I really hope Microsoft has sorted out the

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Issue 183

F ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from *Edge Online's* discussion forum

Topic: Transparent tutorials in games

I like the bit in *HL2's* Ravenholm where you can't get through a door because there are two circular sawblades stuck in the frame. There's another stuck in the wall with the top half of an enemy resting on it. As soon as you remove the sawblades from the door, and while you're still holding one, a bunch of enemies head towards you. You'd have to be very unlucky or stupid to come out of that situation without the knowledge you need.

freethinker

As much as I've liked the games, I've always hated how the *Zelda* franchise has plodded through its introduction to movement and such.

Ras Dam

You're not alone there. Frankly, a bunch more videogames could do with getting on that 'show, don't tell' wagon.

Mr. Brooks

■ It's a cliché in movies that each time a new technology becomes available (sound, colour, widescreen, CGI), the next few years are littered with bad films that put flaunting that technology ahead of obviously no-longer-important issues like plot, character development, drama and so on.

Reading through E183, it became noticeable that all the ads and screenshots for games with HD content major on close-ups of principal characters or vista shots, in both cases

'digital asset creation' again, but at the moment too many PS3 and Xbox 360 developers seem to be labouring long and hard to deliver the gaming equivalent of Pearl Harbor.

Dave Lockwood

Pearl Harbor. Ooof. But new technologies always need a bit of time before their strengths and weaknesses become evident. *Mario Galaxy's* rim lighting's been a bit of a fad, but it's been put to good use in that game, and other devs will learn from it.

The fascination with tech for its own sake always wears off, and folk will calm down and start to think about gameplay instead of 'digital asset creation'

to showcase overwhelming detail. The image does not suggest any gameplay, or even that it's a game rather than a movie or book cover being sold.

But look at the screenshots for Wii games, whether *Nights*, *Super Smash Brothers Brawl*, or the *SMG* review examples: they show a gameworld with stuff you can clearly interact with in a gamey way.

Look at it another way: render a tree short of photorealism, it can't be a tree, so people see a game object that might have a coin if you climb up it or jump on to it from a roof (they parse the scene for gameplay); but render a photorealistic tree as part of a photorealistic environment, and all people see is a tree.

The fascination with tech for its own sake always wears off (and there are a few Wii developers who seem to think they can come up with better ways to allocate buttons and gestures than Miyamoto – this just in: they can't) and folk will calm down and start to think about gameplay instead of

■ You know, you begin to feel jaded, you think that you've seen it all and that you're finally growing out of videogames. Games just begin to feel a little flat and uninteresting. But then something like *Mario Galaxy* comes along, and you get a whiff of that old Nintendo magic that made you fall in love with videogames in the first place, and suddenly everything feels brand new. Everything is exciting again.

I want to play it, I rush home just to have another go, and am completely oblivious to the passage of time. Aside from a slightly insolent camera, there's nothing that I'm not filled to the brim with girlish glee over.

The trouble is, when I try to identify to myself what exactly makes it so much better, so much more interesting, than other games I have trouble with coming up with anything at all. The graphics are great, the controls are tight and responsive, the music is fantastic, the level design has Nintendo's usual flair and then some. But, to me, those things just meant that the game had



The best letter wins a DS Lite

been refined with expert precision, and I don't think that was what drew me in so much. Other games have high production values, other games are refined to near insane levels. But then it hit me: the reason that *Mario Galaxy* is such an excellent videogame is that it's just an excellent videogame.

There's no stupid melodrama constantly being spoon-fed to you, there's no gruff space marine, the colour palette has something other than grey and red in it, there's no tacked-on licence and certainly no pretensions of realism. It's just pure, 100 per cent, grade-A, unadulterated videogame. All of the superfluous rubbish that games have accumulated since the original *Super Mario Bros* has been stripped away. There's nothing to be had here but pure simple fun. Give me that over 20 years of advancement any day.

Matt Wood

Spooky. We've been thinking the same sort of things (see p77).

■ I write this on the eve of going to buy *Mass Effect*, hopefully so I can create a morbidly obese avatar to play the game with. Then I notice the 7/10 *Edge* score and figure that I've occasionally enjoyed previous 7s, so it's worth a punt.

This season's game harvest has never been as sumptuous (nor garnered as many **Edge** 10s), but I can't help feeling after this year's bounty, 2008 is bound to be a disappointment by comparison. I fully expect Q1 and Q2 will be fallow (*Shadowrun* this year, anyone?) but at least we'll have the opportunity to grab the games we didn't buy this time round cheaply.

Incidentally, I was greatly relieved to see that your Christmas issue didn't have perforated windows on the front cover. The last time you did similar with the original DS issue [E143], a boneheaded acquaintance decided with great glee to open the 'lid'. He didn't understand why I got upset.

Ian Thompson

You were supposed to perforate the windows yourself. It was interactive!

Three 10s. Now here is something we all have the right to joyfully

Are those of us who can still remember Super Mario World cartridges ever going to get that same exhilaration from 'the new big thing' again?

rant about. Ah, what the hell, I'll say something positive for once. After a tiny cameo from *Half-life 2* in *Lost*, endless debates over *Manhunt 2* and millions of people unwilling to admit that *Shadow Of The Colossus* is a far better piece of arty enjoyment than the films of Wes Anderson, it's unbelievably satisfying to say that videogames have unarguably proven themselves to be the finest entertainment medium of this year. *Super Mario Galaxy* is undoubtedly the greatest of games – an *Ocarina Of Time* beater that seems to feed off our finest dreams (you know, the ones with Boo hats).

The *Orange Box* tells a more coherent and satisfying tale than an entire series of *Spooks* (and it's got antlions, which is a slight advantage). Bungie has managed to make us love the *Arbiter*, and also acquired the services of Starbuck and General Zod (he can turn my planet into glass any day) for their little old game. Compare that to the writers' strikes in LA, and Pixar's recent



Ian Thompson and Luke Ritson were both drawn to *Mass Effect*, a game that's polarised opinion. Some see it as a classic. Others, like us, think it's a good game with flaws

troubles with *Cars*, the mixed reception of *Ratatouille*, and how *Heroes* – the best show on TV that isn't *Scrubs* – forces its best character to tit around in feudal Japan for a while. TV and film are struggling media. In two years' time we'll be forced into watching a Janice Dickinson film. Gaming, meanwhile, is booming.

The cool, awe-inspiring blob planets which are scattered around the universe

of *Mario Galaxy* are doubtlessly more enjoyable manifestations of freedom than the real thing (you just know that you have to move universes when there isn't a Bullet Bill planet in your solar system). They teem with creatures that feel alive, and the worlds themselves look as though they are made of the same claymation magic dough that has injected Wallace and Gromit with so much life. Everyone's favourite synthetic killer, the Hunter, meanwhile, is huggable in plush or metal form, and although Forge will never be called the best thing ever for not allowing Scarabs and Elephants to 'interact' (they even do it in the real world, for the love of God!), those two games even manage to blow both *Call Of Duty 4* and *Crysis* out of the water. And when those two are outclassed, you know that this gaming quality boost is lasting longer than it should do. It makes you feel glad that you had such faith in the medium in the first place. Otherwise, we would be just appreciating *AVP2* and *American Gangster* instead of

F

Topic: Gamez is makking uz awl pour reederz

England has slipped from third to 15th place in an international league table for reading skills. What could have possibly led to this disastrous turn of events? The answer, obviously, is 'computer games'. Education secretary Ed Balls has stated: "We should be getting our kids to play computer games a bit less and to read a bit more." So that's settled.

Tin Robot

There's surely some truth to that. There's too many more enticing forms of entertainment than reading these days.

Mk2

That is unmitigated tosh and they know it. They aren't improving schooling, so they need some other 'evil' to lay their blame upon.

Dark Soldier

Unsurprisingly, the fact that there are plenty of text-heavy games available isn't something that's mentioned.

JC

Mass Effect for the curriculum!

Zeldamindmelder

I learnt to read by playing computer games. I wanted to play *Elite* on the BBC, and the only way I was ever going to manage was to read the manual. I still crashed into Lave almost every time I started out. Six-year-olds probably shouldn't pilot spaceships.

Idespair

When I were a lad I watched TV and played games, yet there was never any question of me being allowed to do them as often and as much as I felt like. I had these older people called parents checking up on me and encouraging me to do other things some of the time. The way headlines read nowadays it's as though kids are nothing more than mini consumers who have complete control over their own lifestyle decisions.

JB

anticipating *SSB Brawl* and *GTA4* – and what a shame that would be.

Dan Brown

It's a year we hope we've marked with proper respect with the **Edge** Awards, beginning on page 68. (And let's not get started on Wes Anderson.)

Having looked at, bought and played a variety of the recent slew of top game releases, a hardened gaming friend and myself were sniping the wind (like shooting the breeze, only more hardcore) about hype and expectation. After spending a couple of hours discussing how almost none of these releases lived up to our expectations, some failing completely, I suddenly remembered a quote from Bill Bailey. That modern comic genius (and make no mistake, Mr Bailey is quite definitely the Da Vinci of our generation) said: "I'm English, and as such I crave disappointment".

After the discussion we'd just had about this, my friend and I both thought this was hugely appropriate to how we view videogames. I bought *Halo 3* on the day of its release, all the time willing it to not live up to my expectations. And it didn't. I bought *Assassin's Creed* knowing that it would play nothing like I'd been promised. And it didn't. I bought *Mass Effect* and *Metrod Prime 3* in the full knowledge that neither of them would surpass *KOTOR* or *Echoes*. And they didn't.

Now is this a case of self-fulfilling prophecy resulting from too many years of gaming addiction, leaving me with achy thumbs and a desire to see these games fall short of that golden age of gaming? Or are they really just devoid of the special chemistry that kept me playing *Ocarina* and *System Shock 2* until the small hours of the morning? Are those of us who can still remember blowing the dust from *Super Mario World* cartridges ever going to get that same exhilaration from 'the new big thing' again? How... disappointing.

And then came *Super Mario Galaxy*. Call me a Nintendo fanboy all you want, but this is the first game I've played in a very, very long time that made me completely forget I was involved in playing a game. My first play session lasted four hours, and most of that was

Continued

F Topic: She says the jungle... it just came alive and took him! Why don't we see invisible foes employed more often in games, and of those that do have 'em, which are the best? Blocks 100

All of the foes in *Duke Nukem Forever* are invisible, just like the game.
HeThinksAgain

Yeah, but they cut down on the production costs enormously.

Luke Ritson

We've received more letters in praise of *Super Mario Galaxy* than any other game this year, and only one which had negative things to say about it. Which probably sums it all up nicely.

Between them, my wife and Santa will be delivering COD4, Ace Combat 6, *Uncharted* and PGR4. I have booked two weeks' holiday from work, which should (kids and relatives permitting, of course) be ample time to crack them all.

But then the real piece of ingenuity – which I fully accept may not be everyone's cup of tea. Having already produced three sons who are mad about videogames, I think my family is complete – so I've booked a vasectomy for December 19! I'm told I will need 48-72 hours' complete rest afterwards, so have persuaded my wife to get me *Mass Effect* and *The Orange Box* to aid my recuperation. Not only will the excuse of terrible surgery allow me to go into stealth mode at home and complete both games without work or

family duties interfering, but my fingers should then be nicely warmed up for the big rush on Christmas morning. I accept I can't hope to repeat this if next Christmas is as good for games, but for now I'm looking forward to drowning out my wincing with some alien combat!

Nothing like a bit of videogaming to aid recuperation. Please take note, everyone, that Ian has taken great care to have done his bit toward developing a new generation of gamers *before* going for some work down there. He receives this month's DS Lite to help ease his very understandable pain.

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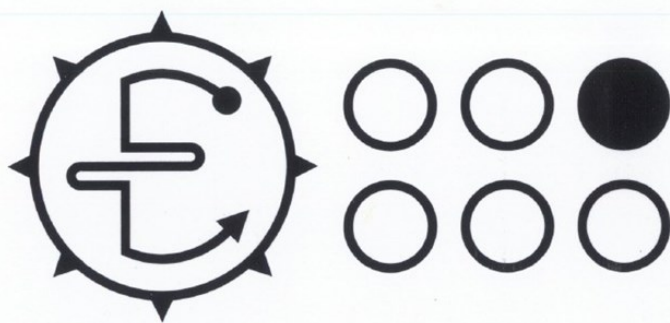
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